In Western philosophy an idea of self-knowledge has played many different roles, whether as a form of practical wisdom and the goal of philosophical inquiry, the starting point in the “immediate certainties” of subjective experience in Cartesian meditations, or in the unifying role of self-consciousness in Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy. In a different vein, the sources of self-deception and the obstacles to knowledge of ourselves in the governing egoism of our motives are themes in both Christian meditation, as well as in La Rochefoucauld and the later French moralistes. This is already a quite varied list of concerns, from the intimate to the grandly systematic, and the differences and relations among these topics could form the basis for a history of Western philosophy itself.

Both within such traditions and elsewhere it is a well-worn observation that we are blind to ourselves in many ways, about our deeper convictions, about what really moves us to act as we do, about our own capacities and their limitations. While not news, such observations are usually treated as unsettling, and that fact is itself noteworthy. For, we might think, our knowledge in general is very imperfect about so many different things that matter to us, including other people and their deeper motivations, so there should be nothing surprising about our error or ignorance concerning our own attitudes and feelings. And yet, when a person’s own convictions or desires remain stubbornly unknown or incomprehensible to him or her, it is natural (though not inevitable) to think that something is amiss with those attitudes themselves, something bearing explanation as the deviation from a norm. We expect ourselves and others expect us, to be able to say such things as what we are now doing and why, to say whether we agree with some remark, whether we want to take the morning or the afternoon train, whether the sun is bothering us, and so on. This is part of a broad back-ground of what we take ourselves to be able to say more or less immediately, without making the sorts of inquiries we would need to in order to answer the same questions about another person. It would be more than unsettling to ourselves and our conversational partners if we were reduced to answering such questions about ourselves with “How should I know?” or “I’ll have to get back to you on that”. Blank ignorance of ourselves at this level would begin to risk incoherence.

But this already distinguishes how we seem to know things about ourselves in a variety of contexts from how we may know the sorts of things about others. This is why pointing out the various ways in which we are ignorant of ourselves with regard to such things as our deeper movements and true character can be unsettling rather than just another reminder of our general epistemic limitations: it clashes with the broad and diffuse background of knowledge of ourselves that we, and those with whom we interact, normally take for granted. Various forms of ordinary self-knowledge are therefore philosophically interesting because the topics of such knowledge (what I am currently doing, what I believe about something, what I mean by my own words) are not only basic to the human form of life, but are such that they themselves are impaired when our consciousness of them is blocked or impaired.

The reference to humans in the title of Quassim Cassam’s book is not there to distinguish its topic from that of other animals seeking to know themselves, but rather to announce one of the main themes of the book: that contemporary philosophers writing on the topic of self-knowledge have been working with a thoroughly idealized model of the person, a model he calls “homo philosophicus” (modelled on the rational man of “homo economicus”) which has distorted philosophical thinking about the nature and importance of self-knowledge. This is a mythical creature all of whose attitudes are as they rationally ought to be and whose “self-knowledge is exhaustive and infallible”. Self-knowledge for Cassam, by contrast, is a matter of giving us an account of human beings as they really are, with due acknowledgement of the errors that we are systematically prone to. Cassam denies that the ways that people come to know themselves are essentially different from the means they would employ to know the same things about others. He argues that knowing what we believe or what we want is just as much based on inference and observation as is knowing what another person may believe or want, even if the bases for such inferences in one’s own case will often be in sources of evidence (for example, private experiences, “internal promptings”) which are not available to another person. This position is known as “inferentialism”. He acknowledges that these private sources would seem to preserve the very forms of self-knowledge that underlies his inferentialism suggests we can do without, but he argues that we need not be too concerned.

The perfectly rational and infallibly self-aware “homo philosophicus” is certainly a mythological creature that Cassam’s debunking story needs to represent some actual philosophers as relying on this myth. In the central part of the book, much of Cassam’s fire is directed at the appeal to something called the “Transparency Condition” in recent discussions of self-knowledge. This is the idea that in ordinary cases a person can answer a question about their own belief by reflecting on the object of their belief – what the belief is about – rather than needing to consult evidence about themselves of the sort they would rely on in reporting the beliefs of another person. There is more than one version of this idea, and none of them is beyond controversy (certainly not my position). Cassam’s thought here that is challenging and worth attending to, but which he has made it difficult to disentangle from the high degree of shadowboxing on display. He recognizes what is unintuitive about the broad Inferentialism he outlines here (is it really by inference that people know they love their children?, he asks), but he gives this view the most thoroughgoing defence it has yet received. He is right to emphasize how complex and partial our ordinary substantial knowledge of ourselves really is, and how much of what we take to know about ourselves is not based on purely first-person self-knowledge, but depends on other people and inferences from the world around us. He is right, moreover, to insist that the philosophical understanding of self-knowledge needs to confront the growing literature from social psychology, and the various ways in which we are systematically wrong about what we think and why.

All of this is important, but does not render “trivial” or philosophically uninteresting the vast and varied background of what an ordinary person is taken to know about their own feelings, attitudes and actions. One curious omission in the book is any discussion of the distinctive logic of the first-person pronoun, which forms the basis for so many of the founding discussions of self-knowledge in analytic philosophy, several of which appeared in an excellent collection Cassam edited for Oxford in 1994. Attention here might also have been usefully directed to the context in which assumptions about the speaker’s authority and its limitations express themselves.

Choosing to cast his story in terms of an opposition between a philosopher’s invention of the rational man, and the lives of humans is unfortunate in another way as well, for it encourages Cassam to present himself throughout as a kind of “anti-philosopher”, someone who is finally going to expose the past several decades of philosophical work on subjectivity and self-knowledge for the sham that it is. The tone of weariness with the enterprise is unrevealed. Few pages one encounters sentences of the form “Only a philosopher would think . . .”, as though what were necessary is efficient to dismiss whatever comes next. He makes it clear in the Preface that he wants the book to reach a readership beyond “professional philosophers”, and that is an admirable ambition, perhaps particularly so for a book on how we do and do not know ourselves. But he succumbs to the temptation of thinking that the way to reach the common reader is by flattering what are assumed to be the prejudices of the uninstructed, to the effect that the professors of philosophy have once again betrayed the big questions and are exclusively concerned with trivial matters with no bearing on what makes self-knowledge genuinely interesting or important to our lives. This is a strategy likely to backfire in any case, but perhaps particularly so when the author is as ambivalent as Cassam is about the actual value and importance of what he calls “substantial self-knowledge”. For after building up the hopes of some readers in the Preface and elsewhere, to the effect that here at last is a book that will respond to the interest in self-knowledge that drew them to the topic in the first place, Cassam spends much of the final chapter on the value of self-knowledge deflating those hopes, concluding that “It doesn’t look like substantial self-knowledge has intrinsic value”, and that its special importance has been inflated by “high-minded philosophers” who seek to “explain the value of self-knowledge by reference to abstract, high-sounding ideals”.

One might think of this conclusion as a sober form of intellectual honesty, unflinchingly following the argument where it leads. But by this point both the common reader and the professional philosopher may feel more than disappointed when, after so much preliminary chastisement of philosophers for having ignored the big and substantial questions about self-knowledge, we are in the end to be told that the philosophical understanding of self-knowledge is not to be found among social psychologists, for the reasons that Cassam takes up, and gives a misleading impression to either sort of reader of their place within current discussions of self-knowledge as they bear on the understanding of action, ethics, perception – and even practical wisdom itself.

I’ll have to get back to you.