

Acquaintance

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Forthcoming in T Bayne, A Cleeremans, and P Wilkin eds. *Oxford companion to consciousness*.

In every familiar case, a conscious subject has a *perspective* on the world. From time to time, various things are brought within this perspective: when one sees a mockingbird, or entertains a thought about Tony Blair, the mockingbird---or Blair---comes within one's perspective. Upon reflection, it seems that not all entries into a subject's perspective are on a par: the mockingbird when seen seems to be in some sense *more intimately* within one's perspective than is Blair when merely thought about. This suggests---and a number of philosophers have found theoretical utility in supposing---that there may be a *maximally* intimate way of being in a subject's perspective.

One of these philosophers was Bertrand Russell, who influentially labelled this maximally intimate connection *acquaintance* (Russell 1912). Russell was renaming his teacher James Ward's notion of *presentation*, arguably adapted in turn from Kant's *intuition*, itself an adaptation of still older notions.

Russell on acquaintance

It will aid understanding to briefly sketch Russell's discussion of acquaintance.

Russell's paradigm case of acquaintance emerged out of a discussion of perceptual experience: given that such an experience brings acquaintance with *something*---Russell called this thing a "sense-datum"---Russell wondered *what* is a sense-datum? Suppose one walks around a square table one sees: the object of one's acquaintance changes shape, Russell thought (here one is aware of a diamond, there one is aware of a trapezoid). Since the table does not change shape, it follows that the sense-datum is something other than the table, and indeed, not in the external world but rather somehow inside one: in Russell's view, an entity in one's brain.

This discussion raises two questions: first, why suppose perceptual experience brings acquaintance with something? Arguably, this claim, quite persistent in the tradition, may be accepted due to the way such experience strikes one upon introspective reflection (Martin 2001). And second, why suppose the sense-datum changes shape? Certainly such an experience seems to involve awareness of a changing shape, but it also involves awareness of a *constant* shape-like property: the square shape of the table. Still, the changing shapes are arguably *aspects* under which the constant shape is perceived; in this sense, awareness of the changing shapes is more intimate than awareness of the constant shape.

(In addition to brain entities and their features presented in perception, Russell's list of objects of acquaintance extended (with perhaps more tenuous motivation) to include *remembered* such objects, and "universals" or features grasped by "abstraction" from

repeated instances.)

Russell endorsed a famous “principle of acquaintance”---loosely, that one can only refer to, or think directly about objects of one’s acquaintance. One can in a sense think about Blair, but not refer to him: such a thought is about Blair only indirectly or “by description”, as the entity associated in a certain way with certain sense-data.

Acquaintance in contemporary perspective

Recent literature has developed a number of notions which help to clarify the metaphor of “maximal intimacy”.

First, acquaintance can be thought of as a *prime psychological relation* (Williamson 2000). That is to say, when one is acquainted with an entity, this is a psychological matter; and it is not composed out of a psychological feature one has in oneself, leaving the object out, together with a nonpsychological condition the object has. The existence of prime psychological relations is at odds with a popular view expressed in the slogan “intentionality is the mark of the mental” [**representationalism; consciousness and intentionality; contents of consciousness**]. Arguably, for something to be *intentional* is for it to be *directed at* a goal specified with a certain condition; directedness is arguably a matter of how something is in itself, rather than in relation to other things. So if all psychological features are a matter of directedness, as the slogan suggests, no psychological features can be prime relations. The very existence of acquaintance, on this analysis, is matter of controversy. Primeness is required for intimacy, since the object is a *participant* in the psychological fact, rather than external to it.

Second, acquaintance can be thought of as involved with *phenomenal consciousness* [**concepts of consciousness**]. An entity with such-and-such features being an object of one’s acquaintance can be part of what one’s experience is like for one---relations of acquaintance can be *phenomenal* characters---rather than beyond one’s conscious ken.

Third, although Russell’s paradigm of acquaintance was perception, rather than thought, acquaintance can still be thought of as having a special status in relation to thought. For instance, whenever so-and-so is an object of acquaintance, one should be in a position to think about it. Still stronger connections could be embraced. For one, perhaps what is sometimes called an “epistemic rigidity” condition could be imposed, according to which there is a way of thinking about the object of acquaintance guaranteed to eliminate reasonable mistakes about *which thing* it is (by contrast, I could be mistaken about who I am, if due to a knock on the head I come to think that I am Hume). For another, perhaps there is a way of thinking about the object of acquaintance which brings the object into the thought: an idea sometimes expressed by calling such thoughts “quotational”---after the manner in which putting quote marks around a word gives a way of talking about that very word surrounded by the quote marks (Chalmers 2003) [**epistemology of consciousness**].

Objects of acquaintance

What sorts of entities can be objects of acquaintance? Was Russell correct to think that physical objects outside one's body are never objects of acquaintance? Perhaps this question can be answered indirectly, by assessing which *features* can be objects of acquaintance, then determining which entities can have those features.

The epistemic rigidity condition may prove useful for determining which features can be objects of acquaintance, on a case-by-case basis. Is there a way of thinking about the feature *being made of water* guaranteed to latch on to that specific feature? Plausibly, thinking of it in terms of its being clear, drinkable, and abundant would not do the trick: something other than water, with a different chemical composition, could mimic these features (Putnam 1975). What about thinking of it as the substance composed of molecules composed of two hydrogen atoms and an oxygen atom? Maybe some deeper substance could mimic our way of thinking about oxygen.

Still, plausibly, we have a way of thinking about the particular phenomenal character of seeing something red which cannot be mimicked, so perhaps this phenomenal character is an object of acquaintance (Chalmers 2003).

So, while psychological entities continue to seem to be good candidate objects of acquaintance, the jury is still out on whether---against Russell---acquaintance with the external world is possible.

Philosophical applications of acquaintance

Acquaintance may play a role in the theory of reference. Russell's view that one can only refer to an object of one's acquaintance is not especially plausible (Kripke 1972). But if all reference is under an aspect or "mode of presentation" (Frege 1892), the Russellian idea that *aspects* must be objects of acquaintance might still have a significant place in the theory of reference.

Acquaintance may play a role in the theory of consciousness. On the widely discussed "higher-order representation" theory of consciousness, for an experience to have a certain feature---say, being uncomfortable---as its phenomenal character (for it to be uncomfortable for its subject) is for the experience to be represented to its subject as having that feature [**philosophical theories of consciousness; representationalism**]. The theory is popular due to its capturing the idea that one cannot be utterly blind to one's phenomenal characters: they must be present to one's perspective. One way to implement this theory is the so-called "inner sense" theory, on which this is for the subject to have an inner perception of the experience as having that feature. Now, if inner sensing is like outer sensing, it can go wrong: just as a red thing can look green, one's experience could *be* of something's looking red, but *be sensed as*---and therefore have as its phenomenal character---a case of something's looking green. This might seem to beggar comprehension, and is sometimes given as a reason to reject higher-order representation views (Byrne 1997). But suppose the experience's being a certain way is present to one's perspective by being an object of acquaintance. Since

acquaintance is a prime relation, there can be no possibility of absence of its object, and thus no error can arise (Hellie forthcoming).

Acquaintance may play a role in the theory of perception. A lively debate in the contemporary literature concerns whether perception essentially involves acquaintance, or mere intentionality; if it involves acquaintance rather than intentionality, whether the object of acquaintance can ever be in the external world; and if so, how to square this with the possibility of perceptual aspect and error (Martin 2006).