Beatrice Edgell's Myth of the Given

Uriah Kriegel

Forthcoming in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*

Introduction

Wilfred Sellars' "myth of the given" had a momentous influence on 20th-century epistemology, putting under pressure the internalist foundationalism so prominent in early analytic philosophy. In this paper, I argue that the core themes in Sellars' argument are anticipated in the work of the London philosopher and psychologist Beatrice Edgell (1871-1948). Edgell explicitly argued that "'knowledge by acquaintance' is a myth invented by epistemology." In some respects, however, Edgell's argument against the myth of the given is even more compelling than Sellars' – or so I will argue. The core of the paper logically reconstructs and historically contextualizes Edgell's line of argument, as emerging out of a critique of Russell's epistemology, with the goal of showing that the "myth of the given" effectively predated Sellars by four decades.

1. Bertrand Russell and Knowledge-by-Acquaintance

Edgell's identification of a myth of givenness, and her argument against it, appear in the context of a sustained critical discussion of Russell's notion of knowledge by acquaintance

(Russell 1910, 1912 Ch.5, and Edgell 1915, 1917, 1919). To appreciate Edgell's contribution here, then, we need to review this particular aspect of Russell's epistemology. This is the mandate of the present section.

Among the psychological verbs natural language has equipped us with is "know," which admits of two kinds of complement:

[K1] I know Jimmy.
[K2] I know that Jimmy exists.

Call the mental state reported in K1 "objectual knowledge" and that reported in K2 "propositional knowledge." Over the past century, analytic epistemologists have been far more interested in propositional than in objectual knowledge. Indeed, for large tracts of the past century, the question of how to understand "S knows that *p*" served as the organizing problem of Anglophone epistemology; whereas the analysis of "S knows *x*" has received comparatively much less attention.

One notable exception is Russell, whose epistemology revolved centrally around the notion of a kind of irreducibly non-propositional knowledge he called *knowledge by acquaintance*. As later discussants sometimes noted, Russell says very little that is *positive* about the nature of knowledge by acquaintance (see, e.g., Edgell 1918: 176, Parker 1949: 1). He tells us that it is a relation of direct awareness (Russell 1910: 108), but says neither (a) that it is the *only* relation of direct awareness nor (b) what might distinguish it from other relations of direct awareness, if such there be.

"Direct awareness" here means awareness of something that is not mediated by awareness of something else. That is:

> (Direct Awareness) For any subject S and item *x*, S is directly aware of *x* iff (i) S is aware of *x* and (ii) there is no *y*, such that S is aware of *x* in virtue of being aware of *y*.

Insofar as knowledge by acquaintance (henceforth: KbA) is a relation of direct awareness, then, when I know by acquaintance some *x*, I am aware of *x* and there is nothing else I am aware of in virtue of which I am aware of *x*. Now, if KbA were the *only* form of direct awareness, or if there were some feature F such that, of all forms of direct awareness, KbA were the only one exhibiting F, then we would have a positive account of KbA. But as noted, Russell makes neither kind of claim.

Russell does offer a *negative* definition of KbA. In his scheme, we can home in on KbA through appreciation of two distinctions: between "knowledge of truths" and "knowledge of things," and, among knowledge of things, between knowledge of things *by description* and knowledge of things *by acquaintance*. The first distinction is essentially the distinction between propositional and objectual knowledge (see Russell 1912: 69). The second is this:

> Knowledge of things, when it is of the kind we call knowledge by *acquaintance*, is ... logically independent of knowledge of truths... Knowledge of things by *description*, on the contrary, always involves ... some knowledge of truths as its source and ground. (Russell 1912: 72-3)

To say that some instance of objectual knowledge, say S knowing *x*, is logically dependent on propositional knowledge is to say that there is some *p*, such that had it not been the case that S knows that *p*, it would not be the case that S knows *x*. The fact that S knows *x* thus logically entails that S knows that *p* for *some p*. Accordingly, to say that S knowing *x* is logically

independent of propositional knowledge is to say that for *no p* does S knowing *x* entail S knowing that *p*, because there is no *p* such that had S not known that *p*, S would not know *x*.

In defining KbA as objectual knowledge that is logically independent of propositional knowledge, then, Russell effectively defines it as follows:

> (KbA) S knows *x* by acquaintance iff (i) S knows *x* and (ii) there is no *p*, such that S knowing *x* entails S knowing that *p*.

Russell is explicit that this logical independence need not imply *psychological* independence: "it would be rash to assume that human beings ever, in fact, have acquaintance with things without at the same time knowing some truth about them" (1912: 72). However, the *logical* independence of some objectual knowledge from propositional knowledge marks it off as specially significant, and this is the kind of knowledge Russell labels "knowledge by acquaintance."

It is important to appreciate that the "by" in Russell's "knowledge by acquaintance" is intended as a *constitutive*, not *causal*, "by" (see Giustina 2022: 2): just as, when I greet you *by* waving my hand, the waving of my hand does not *cause* the greeting, but *constitutes* it, so when I know by acquaintance some *x*, the acquaintance with *x* does not *cause* my knowledge of *x*, but *constitutes* it. Thus what Russell means by KbA is not knowledge *based* on acquaintance, but, in C.D. Broad's expression, knowledge which *is* acquaintance (Broad 1919: 206).

Russell gives KbA a foundational role in his epistemology. Indeed, he seems to hold that knowledge that *p depends upon* KbA. He writes:

> All our knowledge, both knowledge of things and knowledge of truths, rests upon acquaintance as its foundation. It is therefore important to consider what kinds of things there are with which we have acquaintance. (Russell 1912: 75)

Consider Russell's views around the same period on knowledge of the external world (Russell 1912 Ch.2, 1914 Ch.3). According to Russell, empirical beliefs about the external world are justified by inference to the best explanation, where what needs explaining are the stable patterns in the sense data of which we have KbA. The hypothesis that there is a mind-independent cat living in his house, Russell argued, best explains the recurring patterns in his cat-y sense data. What serves as the explanandum here is a web of relational facts (resemblance facts, contiguity facts, etc.) about the sense data of which Russell has KbA. Presumably, it is impossible to have knowledge that these facts obtain without having knowledge-by-acquaintance of the sense data figuring in these facts.

Russell seems committed to the following line of thought, then:

1) propositional knowledge about the external world is based on propositional knowledge of patterns across sense data;
2) propositional knowledge of patterns across sense data requires KbA of sense data; therefore,
3) propositional knowledge about the external world requires some KbA.

Here we see clearly how empirical knowledge-that is dependent upon KbA in Russell's epistemology.

Russell put forward many other theses about KbA, most famously that we enjoy KbA of sense data and universals but not of ordinary objects. My concern here is with two specific ideas in Russell: that *there is* such a thing as KbA, that is, a kind of objectual knowledge logically independent of any propositional knowledge; and that KbA is foundational, in that empirical propositional knowledge *depends on* KbA.

Together, these two ideas paint an epistemological picture that stands in stark contrast to 20th-century epistemology's near-obsession with "S knows that *p*" (and relative disinterest in objectual knowledge). One naturally wonders what intellectual vicissitudes were faced by Russell's KbA-centric epistemology that have led to this marginalization of objectual knowledge. Arguably, one central factor here has been the "myth of the given" (more on this in §4). This expression is associated with Wilfred Sellars (1956), of course, but as I am now going to argue, the central idea behind the "myth of the given" took shape in its essential form already in the decade immediately following Russell's early works on KbA, in the work of Beatrice Edgell (1915, 1918, 1919).

In those first years after Russell's introduction of KbA, two leading philosophers – prominent in their day, but virtually unknown today – led the critical charge against it. They are the London-based philosophers Dawes Hicks (a central figure in the "critical realism" movement) and Beatrice Edgell, one of earliest British thinkers to straddle the line between philosophy and

empirical psychology.[1] Hicks' and Edgell's critiques share a common core. Interestingly, however, they chose to frame their critiques slightly differently, insofar as Hicks took himself to deny the existence of an acquaintance relation, whereas Edgell showed greater dialectical agility in arguing that the phenomenon Russell called acquaintance does not amount to knowledge (see Edgell 1919: 202).

In order to properly appreciate the dialectical and historical context of Edgell's contributions, in the next section I reconstruct Hicks' main argument against Russell. As we will see, Hicks' argument has a dialectically significant lacuna in it. This discussion will help us appreciate, in §3, Edgell's master argument against Russell, which fills in the missing dialectical link and sets up a first myth-of-the-given argument against Russellian epistemology. In §4, I will present Sellars' famed version of the "myth of the given" argument and assess the extent to which it is anticipated in Edgell's version. As I will show, there are important differences between the two, but there is also a crucial common thread. To my mind, Edgell's argument is at least as compelling as Sellars', despite having enjoyed much more limited uptake. I hope the discussion to follow could help correct this. In any case, it seems to me quite important, for a correct representation of the history of analytic philosophy, that we have a clear appreciation of the role Beatrice Edgell had

[1] Edgell was in fact a key figure in the development of experimental psychology in the UK: after a research visit to the University of Wurzburg in 1900, where she worked with Oswald Külpe – at the time probably one of the two most prominent psychologists in the world, along with Edward Titchener at Cornell – she established at Bedford College, the UK's first higher-education college for women, what appears to have been only the third experimental-psychology lab in the UK. She was a prominent figure in the philosophical and psychological landscape of the first decades of the 20th century, at different times serving as president of the Mind Association, the Aristotelian Society, and the British Psychological Society. For more biographical and other background information about Edgell, see Valentine 2001 and 2006.

in floating an early prototype, if you will, of the "myth of the given."

2. Dawes Hicks and Perceptual Holism

Russell did not think we had KbA of desks, butterflies, and the like ordinary objects, but only of sense data (and universals). Importantly, however, unlike Ayer's sense data, Russell's don't exist "inside" the perceiver's mind, but are independent existences ("I believe that the actual data in sensation, the immediate objects of sight or touch or hearing, are extra-mental, purely physical" – Russell 1915: 402). They are best thought of as *secondary-quality tropes*: individual sensible qualities, such as this individual laptop shape, this individual laptop silverness, individual laptop hardness, and so on. It is these sensible laptop-tropes that, for Russell, we have KbA of. Of the laptop itself we have no KbA. We certainly have *propositional* knowledge about it (e.g., we know *that* it is rectangular), as well as knowledge by *description* of it (e.g., we know of the rectangular electronic device in the study). But as far as objectual knowledge that does *not* presuppose propositional knowledge, i.e. KbA, that we have not of the laptop but only of the sensible laptop-tropes that Russell called sense data.

In denying that there is such a thing as KbA, Hicks was denying that there is *anything* we have objectual knowledge of independently of having any propositional knowledge about. The starting point of his argument is a specific phenomenological view of sensory perception:

> Whoever endeavours faithfully to describe, as he has lived through it, a perceptive act of his own will describe it in some such manner as that here exemplified. Viewed from within, it will invariably evince itself as a process, not of constructing an object, but of differentiating the features of an object, of gradually discerning distinctions which were not at first noticed... (Hicks 1917: 325)

In Russell's picture, KbA of various sensible laptop-tropes comes first, and knowledge of the laptop comes later. There is here a kind of atomism whereby the ordinary object is seen as a whole "constructed" from parts consisting in the relevant individual qualities. But for Hicks, faithful attention to the concrete reality of perceptual experience reveals the opposite: that awareness of the laptop is not achieved by putting together awareness of such elemental constituents, but on the contrary is a matter of differentiating the laptop from everything in the holistic visible scene before one that is not the laptop. In the genealogy of perceptual experience, the whole is prior to the parts, such that perceptual awareness of *x* requires at a minimum differentiating *x* from what is not *x*.

It is interesting to note that Hicks is writing around the same time that Gestalt psychology explodes onto the scene.[2] The central idea of Gestalt psychology was that in our perceptual psychology, the whole often precedes the parts. This kind of "perceptual holism," if you will, clearly animates also Hicks' philosophical work on perception, and is the basis of his rejection of KbA.

[2] Although the notion of Gestalt structure originates in von Ehrenfels 1890, it is with Wertheimer 1912 that Gestalt psychology, with its rebellion against the atomism baked into traditional introspectionist psychology, starts to become an ever more dominant framework in psychological research.

How exactly does this perceptual holism militate against KbA? Hicks' thought seems to be that insofar as all perceptual awareness involves indispensably a cognitive act of differentiation, knowledge of *x* cannot be logically independent from propositional knowledge *about x*:

> There is no such relation as that which Mr. Russell would denote by the phrase 'knowledge by acquaintance'... The crudest act of sense-apprehension is still an act of discriminating and comparing, an act involving, therefore, the characteristic that, in a highly developed form, is fundamental in an act of judging. (Hicks 1917: 336; see also Hicks 1919: 165)

Judging that my laptop is rectangular involves predicating rectangularity of my laptop. Perceptual awareness of my laptop may not entail knowing that it is rectangular, and may not even entail knowing that it is my laptop; but for Hicks, it does at a minimum require being aware of the laptop *as a separate individual thing*, and this awareness-*as* logically entails knowing *that* my laptop is a *thing*, an *object*, something that is separate from the rest of the visible scene. Thus not only in judgment and belief, but also in perceptual awareness, certain cognitive capacities are brought to bear which come from the subject's own mind, such that the resulting awareness is not a purely passive "condition of acquiescence in what is given" (Hicks 1917: 332).

The key to Hicks' critique, then, is the idea that when we are aware of *x*, we must be aware of it as separate from some *y*, where at the minimum *y* is everything-that-is-not-*x*, and such awareness-as implies some propositional knowledge. We may put the argument as follows:

The Hicks Argument

1) By definition, S has knowledge of *x by acquaintance* iff (i) S knows *x* and (ii) there is no *p*, such that S knowing *x* entails S knowing that *p*;
2) S knows *x* only if S differentiates *x* from some *y*;
3) S differentiating *x* from *y* entails S knowing that *x* is numerically different from *y*; therefore,
4) If S knows *x*, then there is some *p* – namely, the proposition that *x* is numerically different from *y* – such that S knowing *x* entails S knowing that *p* [from 2 and 3]; and therefore,
5) For any S and *x*, S does not have knowledge of *x by acquaintance* [from 1 and 4].

What are Russell's option is responding to this argument?

One option is to indulge Hicks' perceptual holism and ditch the atomistic, bottom-up approach to sense data as an unnecessary distractor. Josh Parsons (2004) introduced into contemporary philosophy the notion of a "distributional property": holistic properties such as being polka-dotted (instantiated by the dress as a whole) or being one sixth red, one sixth green, one sixth orange, and so on (instantiated by the beach ball as a whole). Instead of attributing to me a multiplicity of KbAs now, one for each "homogeneous" secondary-quality trope I am currently perceptually aware of, Russell could attribute to me a single KbA whose object is the total distributional sensible-quality trope present to my mind at this moment.[3]

However, Hicks has an answer to this move. It is that even if we construe KbA as a relation to such a global distributional sense datum, in the experience of perceiving there is a still

[3] One could further speculate about "diachronically thick" distributional tropes that would be objects of minimally longitudinal awareness *episodes*, as opposed to instantaneous awareness *acts*.)

further element of discrimination and differentiation, namely between the object of acquaintance and the very *act* of acquaintance. When I am aware of the total scene before my eyes, I am aware of it as an item separate from me, something that stands over against me (a *Gegenstand*!), and this involves differentiating the object of awareness, at a minimum, from the subject of awareness. Hicks writes:

> The act of cognition, then, is no sooner called into being than it is 'directed upon something,' and evinces its character as an act of discriminating... the object of an act of awareness is always other than, and distinct from, the act of being aware of it. (Hicks 1917: 329)

This indeed seems to be inherent to the ordinary experience of perceptual awareness. As Christopher Frey (2013: 76) puts it more recently, "when we phenomenally appreciate the presence of a sensuous element in an experience, we appreciate the sensuous element as being both something other than ourselves and as standing in opposition to ourselves."

A more plausible option is to challenge Premise 2 of the Hicks Argument by distinguishing between (a) S knowing *x* and (b) S knowing *x as x*, that is, knowing *x* as a separate, numerically distinct, "self-standing" entity. Perhaps (b) implies S's knowing *x* to be distinct from some *y*. Still, Russell might claim, regardless of whether it is *psychologically* possible, it is *logically* possible to know *x* without knowing *x as x*, indeed without knowing *x as anything*. This would be a bare, non-conceptualizing objectual knowledge that does not even imply knowing of *x* that it is distinct from any *y*. In such bare acquaintance, S is aware of *x*, and *x* may *in fact* be numerically distinct from *y*, but it does not follow that S is aware of *x as*

numerically distinct from *y*. In fact, S is aware of *x* without being aware of *x as* ... well, *anything*.

Hicks seems to deny that a bare, non-conceptualizing relation of acquaintance exists in our psychological repertoire (see Hicks 1919: 170-1). But as far as I can see, he has no *argument* for this (cf. Moore 1919: 190-1). This is where Edgell's contribution to the debate becomes highly relevant.

3. Beatrice Edgell and the Epistemic Impotence of Pure Receptivity

Edgell's critique of Russell parallels Hicks' in many respects. She too highlights the indispensability of differentiation, which she sometimes motivates by recourse to a form of perceptual holism (see notably Edgell 1918: 178 and 1919: 199-200). But in some respects Edgell's critique is both (a) more expansive and (b) deeper than Hicks' in important ways.

(a) Expansion. Edgell goes beyond Hicks in arguing that, phenomenologically speaking, the experience of perceiving *x* not only involves differentiation of the token *x* from its surroundings, but also typically involves *assimilation* of *x* to other tokens of the same type. That is, it involves an apprehension of likeness or similarity between *x* and previously experienced items, an apprehension that constitutes a rudimentary form of classification (more on this shortly).

(b) Depth. There is a deeper lesson that Edgell extracts from the line of critique pursued by Hicks and her. In requiring all knowledge, including objectual knowledge of some *x*, to

involve at a minimum differentiation and assimilation – that is, the subject (a) perceptually individuating *x* and (b) classifying *x* as "belonging together" with some previously experienced items – Hicks and Edgell portray knowledge as requiring a modicum of *mental agency*. Now, recall that Russell's main available defense against the Hicks Argument was to insist on a form of bare acquaintance in which S is directly aware of *x* without being aware of *x as* anything – not even *as x*, that is, *as* separate from the rest of reality. But in this form, acquaintance is a kind of *pure receptivity*: the subject does not even differentiate *x* from what is not *x*, let alone assimilates *x* to previously experienced items. In fact, the subject does not mentally *do* anything – they are purely passive, and *x* is simply *given* to them, albeit not even *as x*. This is what Edgell cannot accept could be a genuinely epistemic phenomenon:

> I should not dispute the fact of acquaintance, however much I might deprecate name given to the fact. I should, however, still dispute that the relation in question was a cognitive [i.e., epistemic] relation, and maintain that so to conceive it was to invalidate the meaning of experience and to invent a form of cognition that implied mental atrophy. (Edgell 1919: 202)

As noted, unlike Hicks, Edgell is willing to concede that the form of bare receptivity Russell called acquaintance is a psychologically real phenomenon (though she deplores the name "acquaintance" given to it, with its connotations of epistemic significance). What Edgell disputes is the notion that this relation of bare, non-differentiating, non-assimilating acquaintance qualifies as a form of *knowledge* – precisely on the grounds that knowledge involves essentially the aforementioned modicum of mental agency.

What Edgell contests most fundamentally, then, is the notion that a subject in a state of passive receptivity could qualify as an epistemic agent – as a *knower* – in virtue of being in that state. A knower, for Edgell, "cannot be represented as a passive recipient of the 'given'" (1919: 200). Note that "the given" here means something very specific: it is the object of an awareness which mobilizes no cognitive capacities whatsoever – a purely passive awareness. This is what Russell's KbA must amount to, according to Edgell, and it is for this reason that Edgell "regard[s] 'knowledge by acquaintance' as a myth invented by epistemology" (1919: 196).

Clearly, what Russell is guilty of, for Edgell, is promulgating a myth of the given: it is an epistemologist's myth that passive receptivity to "the given" is a form of knowing. Sellars' argument against the myth of the given, which we will discuss in the next section, is often framed as a dilemma. Interestingly, there is a natural way to frame Edgell's argument as a dilemma as well. Does acquaintance involve any differentiation, assimilation, or classification? If it does, it does not qualify as KbA, because it implies propositional knowledge; but if it doesn't, it does not qualify as knowledge at all, because it fails to involve mental agency on the subject's part. Call this "Edgell's Dilemma." We may formally reconstruct it as follows:

Edgell's Dilemma

1) Any knowledge, whether that *p* or of *x*, involves mental agency;
2) By definition, KbA is objectual knowledge that does not entail any propositional knowledge;

3) Acquaintance with *x* is either (a) acquaintance with *x as* something (at a minimum: *as x*) or (b) bare acquaintance with *x*;
4) Acquaintance with *x as* something entails propositional knowledge about *x* (at a minimum: that *x* is not *y* for some *y*); so,
5) Acquaintance with *x as* something does not qualify as KbA [from 2 and 4]
6) Bare acquaintance with *x* involves no mental agency; so,
7) Bare acquaintance with *x* does not qualify as knowledge [from 1 and 6]; therefore,
8) There is no knowledge by acquaintance [from 3, 5, and 7].

The crucial question, of course, is what justifies Premise 1 in Edgell's dilemma. Why does Edgell think that any properly epistemic phenomenon must implicate epistemic agency, in the form of applying concepts or otherwise exercising cognitive capacities?

Edgell's guiding thought is that for S's awareness of *x* to earn the qualification "epistemic," it must play *some* role in explaining the propositional knowledge that S ends up having about *x*. More specifically, it must play some role in the psychology of (propositional-)knowledge acquisition:

> Our original problem [is] Mr. Russell's own question: "what sort of data would be logically capable of giving rise to the knowledge we possess?" (Edgell 1915: 187)

This is what Edgell thinks bare acquaintance cannot do. For, as a form of pure receptivity, bare acquaintance is in principle incapable of evolving as a result of experience. This is what Edgell herself took to be the heart of her argument:

> I claimed that knowledge as described by the theory of knowledge must be psychologically possible, and that "knowledge by acquaintance" was psychologically impossible, for the reason that from it there could be no advance (Edgell 1919: 195).

Clearly, the notion of "advance" is key to Edgell's argument. Our task is to understand what exactly she has in mind with it.

To appreciate Edgell's line of thought here,[4] let us follow her lead and start by imagining a person, call her Ingrid Persson, who on Monday evening stands by the window and suddenly witnesses a flash of lightning across the sky, and on Tuesday evening finds herself seeing a qualitatively indistinguishable flash of lightning through the same window (cf. Edgell 1915: 181-3). We may specify, if it helps, that these are the first two flashes of lightning Persson has ever seen. At one level, Persson's experiences on Monday and Tuesday are very similar: On Monday, Persson is aware of flash of lightning f_1, and on Tuesday, of flash f_2; and these are, ex hypothesi, qualitatively indistinguishable lightnings. Still, there are both phenomenological and epistemological differences between the two experiences. Phenomenologically, we can expect Persson's second perceptual experience to be richer than the first, in including a felt element of "this again." Epistemologically, the second experience *justifies* Persson in believing something that the first experience cannot justify her in believing, namely, *that* f_2 *is like* f_1 – the belief Persson might express by saying "this thing is like that thing was!" Indeed, from the perspective of

[4] Edgell's original presentation of the argument is somewhat tortured (see Moore 1915), and subsequent modifications were not meant to constitute self-standing presentations. Accordingly, I will reconstruct Edgell's line of thought as I believe her to have intended it from the outset.

the psychology of knowledge acquisition, we *expect* Persson to acquire knowledge that f_2 is like f_1 on the basis of the Tuesday experience but not the Monday one. The question Edgell raises is what must the Tuesday experience be like – and in particular: how must it differ from the Monday experience – for it to explain this advance in propositional knowledge. There must be *something* about the second experience that distinguishes it from the first, and it must be the presence of this *something* that explains why Persson comes to know that f_2 is like f_1.

Now, it will not help Russell's cause to construe that "something" as the *judgment* that f_2 is like f_1 – not only because that wouldn't explain anything, but also and mainly because it would not help secure a role for *acquaintance* in the acquisition of the knowledge that f_2 is like f_1. No, what Russell needs is for there to occur on Tuesday, but not on Monday, some act of direct awareness that (is part of what) makes it possible for Persson to acquire the knowledge that f_2 is like f_1.

A natural thought here is that, on Tuesday, Persson is aware of f_2 under a certain light – namely, *as resembling* f_1. That is, the Tuesday lightning itself appears to Persson under a new and enriched aspect, as compared to the way the Monday lightning appeared to her. The problem for Russell is that this involves a conceptualizing form of awareness, the kind that, as we saw, implies propositional knowledge. What we have here is, in effect, objectual knowledge by *description*, where the relevant description is something like "resembles the thing I saw yesterday." As soon as we allow Persson's awareness to conceptualize f_2 in this way, Persson is in a position to *predicate* "resembles the thing I saw yesterday" of f_2. This is why objectual knowledge by description (e.g., of f_2 as resembling

f_1) is *not* logically independent from propositional knowledge (e.g., that f_2 resembles f_1).

What Russell needs, then, is a difference in *bare acquaintance* between Persson's Monday and Tuesday experiences. But as Edgell argues, there is simply no such difference. As physical phenomena, the two flashes are exactly alike. So if we insist, with Russell, that the object of acquaintance is just a physical phenomenon,[5] which is simply *given* to the subject, with the subject not mentally *doing* anything with it, so to speak, then the objects of Persson's acquaintance will be the same on Monday and Tuesday. Edgell writes:

> In this case SD [the sense datum, i.e. the flash of lightning] is repeated unmodified, it is just the recurrence of the physical event. To modify it in any way, in virtue of the fact that it has been "sensed" before, would be to surrender the whole position. As a physical event it cannot matter whether SD has been seen once or a hundred times. (Edgell 1915: 1981-2)

The construction "S is aware of f_2 as resembling f_1" suggests an enrichment of the *object* of awareness, insofar as "as resembling f_1" is part of the grammatical object. But the truth is that, so long as the object of awareness is just the physical flash of lightning, the real difference between Monday and Tuesday is in the *act* of awareness: on Tuesday there occurs an act of awareness-*as* on top of the bare, non-conceptualizing awareness that there occurred also on Monday.

The upshot is that Russell cannot account for the difference between the Monday and Tuesday experiences that makes it possible

[5] Recall the quotation we already saw from Russell 1915: 402: "the actual data in sensation, the immediate objects of sight or touch or hearing, are extra-mental, purely physical."

for Persson on Tuesday, but not on Monday, to acquire the *knowledge that* f_2 is like f_1. He is not allowed to appeal to the judgment that f_2 is like f_1, nor to a conceptualizing awareness of f_2 as like f_1 (which would constitute objectual knowledge by description), and there is no difference in bare acquaintance between Monday and Tuesday. Ergo: Russell's theory cannot give bare acquaintance with f_2 a role in the acquisition of that propositional knowledge about f_2 that Persson in fact possesses.

The correct account, for Edgell, is that an awareness of the second lightning *as like the first one* – an awareness manifesting the subject's epistemic agency in (a) differentiating the lightning from the rest of the night sky and (b) assimilating it to yesterday's occurrence – is what allows Persson to acquire the knowledge *that* the two lightnings are alike. It is only with the emergence of this awareness-as that we enter the realm of the epistemic. But such awareness-as implies propositional knowledge and therefore does not qualify as KbA.

Keep in mind, in this regard, that, unlike Hicks, Edgell does not contest the reality of bare acquaintance. She is happy to concede that on Tuesday, too, Persson has bare acquaintance with f_2. But she insists that until such bare acquaintance can be shown to play a role in Persson's full-fledged epistemic life, it is not a form of knowing.

There is some plausibility to this insistence, it seems to me, even if I cannot find an explicit justification for it in Edgell. We can appreciate this plausibility, though, by imagining a creature who has *only* bare acquaintance. This creature enjoys any number of bare acquaintances with flashes of lightning and various other aspects of its environment, but never knows any fact *about* any of these. It never knows *that*... anything. It is

hard to think of this creature as having an *epistemic* life. Indeed, for Edgell such a creature would never even be able to acquire the *concepts* of lightning, resemblance, and so on that it would need to form *beliefs* about lightning resemblance, despite its myriad acquaintances. For:

> the acquaintance in question will lead to nothing beyond itself. A hundred and one such acquaintances will not take us towards knowledge of universal resemblance. (Edgell 1916: 184)

The object of bare acquaintance is always a given particular, whereas concepts involve going beyond the given and applying to particulars as yet unexperienced. So, concept acquisition, and with it belief formation, cannot be enabled by bare acquaintance.

In conclusion. Like Hicks, Edgell argues against the existence of KbA, understood as objectual knowledge free of any propositional-knowledge entailments. She does allow for the existence of a relation of bare acquaintance with something that is just *given* to the subject, without the subject cognitively *doing* anything with it. But she denies that this relation constitutes knowledge. At the heart of her argument is the contrast between the essential activeness and agency of the properly epistemic and the essential passiveness or receptivity of bare acquaintance. Such passive receptivity to the given is not an epistemic phenomenon, for Edgell, which is why she declares, as we saw, that "'knowledge by acquaintance' [is] a myth invented by epistemology" (1919: 196). Edgell's myth-of-the-given charge is this: there may be such a thing as bare acquaintance, but it is a mistake to regard it as constituting a form of *knowledge*, because it does not connect with the rest of the subject's epistemic life.

It is worth underlining the way Edgell's line of thought is animated by the principle that for acquaintance to earn the status of knowledge, it would have to somehow enter the subject's epistemic life in its fully developed form. Otherwise, if it remained entirely insulated from propositional knowledge, unable to epistemically justify any judgment *that p*, it would become a sort of verbal fetish to insist on the appellation "knowledge." In this Edgell anticipates Sellars' well-known argument that "the given" is not an epistemic phenomenon because it does not enter the "space of reasons." On to Sellars, then.

4. Wilfred Sellars and the Myth of the Given

Sellars was notoriously a difficult writer, and there is no consensus on how the core argument of "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" (henceforth: EPM) is best understood. EPM is based on a series of three lectures, delivered in March 1956 at the University of London under the title "The Myth of the Given: Three Lectures on Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," but, quite incredibly, at no point does it contain a definition, or so much as an informal elucidation, of the expression "the given." Nor does Sellars ever state explicitly what the "myth" of the given exactly is. He does tell us enough at the outset to understand that, as far as the relation between *act* and *object* of awareness is concerned, the expression "the given" denotes a putative *object* rather than a putative *act* of awareness ("Many things have been said to be given: sense contents, material objects, universals..." – Sellars 1956: 127). But what distinguishes objects of awareness that constitute putative

givens and objects of awareness that don't, and what myth the former are embroiled in - that we are not told.

In this context, it is noteworthy that, after a pair of preparatory sections, EPM launches in earnest, at the opening of §3, with the following argument against the very notion of objectual knowledge:

> Now if we bear in mind that the point of the epistemological category of the given is, presumably, to explicate the idea that empirical knowledge rests on a "foundation" of non-inferential knowledge of matters of fact, we may well experience a feeling of surprise on noting that according to sense-datum theorists, it is *particulars* that are sensed. For what is *known* even in non-inferential knowledge, is *facts* rather than particulars, items of the form *something's being thus-and-so* or *something's standing in a certain relation to something else*. It would seem, then, that the sensing of sense contents *cannot* constitute knowledge... (Sellars 1956: 128; italics original)

From this opening we learn at least two things. First, Sellars' attack on the given has as its starting point the distinction between what we called in §1 propositional and objectual knowledge (Russell's "knowledge of truths" vs. "knowledge of things"). At this early stage, Sellars' line of thought does not shine with dialectical nuance. Knowledge is by nature propositional, we are told, while the given is claimed by its proponents to be the object of *non*-propositional awareness; so, the given cannot be the object of knowledge – there is no *knowledge of givens*. This, then, is what the "myth" of the given must be, and that is the second thing we learn from this passage: the alleged myth of the given is not the myth that the given *exists*, that is, that something *is* given to us, but rather the myth that awareness of a given can constitute a form of *knowledge*.

In this respect, Sellars echoes Edgell rather than Hicks: he does not contest the existence of awareness of particulars, only its entitlement to the qualification "epistemic." Note that, Unlike Edgell, Sellars does not show sensitivity to Russell's distinction between two kinds of objectual knowledge, one which entails propositional knowledge (Russell's knowledge-by-description) and one which does *not* (KbA). It is objectual knowledge *as such* that Sellars claims is impossible. For him, all knowledge is by nature propositional.

What needs to be defended here, clearly, is precisely this principle: that knowledge is by nature propositional. It is a strong principle, making "objectual knowledge" a contradiction in terms; whereas ordinary language, we have seen, instructs that knowledge attributions can perfectly grammatically receive objectual complements. Sellars is aware of this, but insists that "objectual knowledge" is a purely *technical* term. One would be forgiven for being puzzled by this insistence, given that non-philosophers routinely use the objectual "know" in everyday life, and that when they do so their usage is often both literal and perfectly felicitous.

H.L.A. Hart once argued that *Russell's* use of "knowledge by acquaintance" is technical, on the grounds that (1) in ordinary parlance we would merely mean by "I know so-and-so by acquaintance" that we know them because we actually met them as opposed to having heard or read about them, and (2) it is not this kind of phenomenon that could support the epistemological work that Russell wants KbA to do, namely, to be the ultimate ground of the whole edifice of empirical knowledge (Hart 1949: 72). But Sellars does not give this kind of argument. He thinks that no objectual attitude could ever constitute knowledge, and

for principled reasons separate from any specific philosopher's epistemological theory.

Why does Sellars think this? There is no explicit argument for this anywhere in EPM, but at least as far as the Sellars *legacy* is concerned, the key idea seems to be this:

> in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says. (1956: 169; italics original)

To qualify as knowledge, a mental state must enter into epistemic relations, notably relations of justification and reason-providing, with other mental states. Presumably, Russell would insist that bare acquaintance with something is not the kind of thing that can be justified or unjustified. Still, if there is going to be any substance to the claim that acquaintance constitutes knowledge, acquaintance must at least *justify*. And since it cannot justify other acquaintances, the latter not being the kind of thing that can be justified, it must justify propositional states – beliefs.

This, presumably, is what Sellars thinks a non-propositional, objectual attitude cannot do. It cannot justify one in believing *that* things are this way or that way. Again, as far as I can tell there is no explicit argument for this in EPM. But I suspect that Sellars thinks objectual attitudes cannot justify us in believing that things are one way or another because *they make no claim* about how things are. To make a claim about how things are, a mental state must, at a minimum, have a content that involves some *predication*. And that would make that state propositional.

If this is what Sellars has in mind, then the reason objectual attitudes cannot justify is that they are a kind of mental blurting – they point at this, but they don't *say* anything about them. We may put the argument as follows:

The Sellarsian Argument

1) A mental state M qualifies as knowledge only if it can justify and/or be justified;
2) Acquaintance is not the kind of thing that can be justified or unjustified; therefore,
3) Acquaintance with *x* cannot justify any acquaintance with *y* [from 2];
4) In order to justify a belief that *p*, a mental state M must make a claim about how things are;
5) In order to make a claim about how things are, M must have propositional content;
6) By definition, acquaintance with *x* does not have propositional content; so,
7) Acquaintance with *x* cannot justify a belief that *p* [from 4, 5, and 6]; therefore,
8) Acquaintance with *x* cannot justify [from 3 and 7]; and therefore,
9) Acquaintance with *x* does not qualify as knowledge [from 1, 2, and 8].

I call this the Sellarsian Argument, rather than the Sellars Argument, because Premises 4 and 5 are supplied by me rather than Sellars.

What I would like to stress here is that, at its core, the Sellarsian argument is based on the idea that acquaintance could constitute knowledge only if it could interact epistemically with

propositional knowledge. And this is something we have seen anticipated in Edgell: when we imagine a subject enjoying states of bare acquaintance in splendid epistemic isolation, with no propositional knowledge whatsoever, what we are imagining is not recognizable as a knower.

In addition, it is worth noting that what Sellars hopes the argument convinces us of is that acquaintance is unable to deliver foundations for empirical knowledge. (Recall: "the point of the epistemological category of the given is, presumably, to explicate the idea that empirical knowledge rests on a 'foundation' of non-inferential knowledge" – Sellars 1956: 128.) In this too he echoes Edgell's insistence that the problem with acquaintance is that "from it there could be no advance" (Edgell 1919: 195).

Thus Edgell's and Sellars' "myths of the given" have much in common. In particular, both are willing to concede the existence of acquaintance, but disqualify it from constituting knowledge on the grounds that it does not epistemically interact with propositional knowledge. In Edgell, the reason acquaintance cannot interact epistemically with propositional knowledge is that, as it involves no discrimination and no classification, it can "lead to nothing beyond itself." In Sellars, it is because acquaintance is objectual and does not "say anything" about how things are. But both arguments target the alleged myth that purely receptive awareness of something "given" constitutes a form of knowing.

Conclusion

Recent epistemology has seen a revival of interest in knowledge by acquaintance (see, e.g., several contributions to Knowles and Raleigh 2019). Indeed, several authors have recently presented arguments specifically intended to show that acquaintance constitutes knowledge (see Duncan 2020, Atiq 2021, Giustina 2022, and Ranalli forthcoming, as well as Coleman 2019: 52 in passing). Interestingly, these recent authors do not tend to engage with the "myth of the given" line of thought, which has been so influential with previous generations of philosophers. Naturally, when they do face up to it, it is Sellars' version that they address (see notably Atiq 2021: §6). This is unsurprising, of course, given that Edgell's earlier version has been essentially lost to contemporary philosophy. In this Edgell shares the fate of several early analytic women philosophers, such as Susan Stebbing (see Chapman 2013), Dorothy Wrinch (see Felappi 2022), and Grace de Laguna (see Katzav forthcoming), among many other no doubt. My goal here has been to logically reconstruct Edgell's important contribution to early analytic epistemology – in particular her argument against Russellian KbA, which I labeled *Edgell's Dilemma* – and contextualize it historically so its significance in the arc of 20th-century epistemology could be better appreciated.[6]

References

[6] For comments on a previous draft, I am grateful to Matt Duncan and two referees, as well as an associate editor, for *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*.

- Atiq, E. 2021. 'Acquaintance, Knowledge, and Value.' *Synthese* 199: 14035-14062.
- Broad, C.D. 1919. 'Is there "Knowledge by Acquaintance"?' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 2: 206-220.
- Chapman, S. 2013. *Susan Stebbing and the Language of Common Sense*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Duncan, M. 2020. 'Knowledge of Things.' *Synthese* 197: 3559-3592.
- Edgell, B. 1915. 'The Implications of Recognition.' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 16: 179-189.
- Edgell, B. 1918. 'The Implications of Recognition.' *Mind* 27: 174-187.
- Edgell, B. 1919. 'Is there "Knowledge by Acquaintance"?' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 2: 194-205.
- von Ehrenfels, C. 1890. 'On Gestalt Qualities.' Trans. B. Smith. In B. Smith (ed.), *Foundations of Gestalt Theory*. Munich and Vienna: Philosophia Verlag, 1988.
- Felappi, G. 2022. '"It is quite conceivable that judgment is a very complicated phenomenon": Dorothy Wrinch, nonsense and the multiple relation theory of judgement.' *British Journal of the History of Philosophy* 30: 250-266.
- Frey, C. 2013. 'Phenomenal Presence.' In U. Kriegel (ed.), *Phenomenal Intentionality*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Giustina, A. 2022. 'Introspective Knowledge by Acquaintance.' *Synthese* 200:128.
- Hart, H.L.A. 1949. 'Is There Knowledge by Acquaintance?' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 23: 69-90.
- Hicks, G.D. 1917. 'The Basis of Critical Realism.' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 17: 300-359.

- Hicks, G.D. 1919. 'Is there "Knowledge by Acquaintance"?' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 2: 159-178.
- Katzav, J. Forthcoming. 'Grace de Laguna's Analytic and Speculative Philosophy.' *Australasian Philosophical Review*.
- Moore, G.E. 1915. 'The Implications of Recognition' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 16: 201-223.
- Moore, G.E. 1919. 'Is there "Knowledge by Acquaintance"?' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 2: 179-193.
- Parker, D.H. 1945. 'Knowledge by Acquaintance.' *Philosophical Review* 54: 1-18.
- Parsons, J. 2004. 'Distributional Properties.' In F. Jackson and G. Priest (eds.), *Lewisian Themes: The Philosophy of David K. Lewis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ranalli, C. Forthcoming. 'Knowledge of Things and Aesthetic Testimony.' *Inquiry*.
- Russell, B. 1910. 'Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description.' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 11: 108-128.
- Russell, B. 1912. *The Problems of Philosophy*. New York: Holt and Co. and London: William and Norgate.
- Russell, B. 1914. *Our Knowledge of the External World*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Russell, B. 1915. 'The Ultimate Constituents of Matter.' *Monist* 25: 399-417.
- Sellars, W. 1956. 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind.' In H. Feigl and M. Scriven (eds.), *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, I: Foundations of Science and the Concepts of Psychology and Psychoanalysis*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Valentine, E.R. 2001. 'Beatrice Edgell: An Appreciation.' *British Journal of Psychology* 92: 23-36.

- Valentine, E.R. 2006. *Beatrice Edgell: Pioneer Woman Psychologist*. New York: Nova Science Publishers.
- Wertheimer, Max. 1912. 'Experimental Studies on Seeing Motion.' Trans. Michael Wertheimer and K.W. Watkins. In Max Wertheimer, *On Perceived Motion and Figural Organization*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2012.