

The Stalemate Between Causal and Constitutive Accounts of Introspective Knowledge by Acquaintance

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Abstract

This paper will be concerned with the role acquaintance plays in contemporary theories of introspection. Traditionally, the relation of acquaintance has been conceived in analytic epistemology and philosophy of mind as being only epistemically relevant inasmuch as it causes, or enables, or justifies a peculiar kind of propositional knowledge, i.e., knowledge by acquaintance. However, in recent years a novel account of the role of acquaintance in our introspective knowledge has been offered. According to this novel constitutive approach, acquaintance is, in itself, a *sui generis*—i.e., non-propositional—kind of knowledge. As we will suggest, a stalemate between David Chalmers’ account of direct phenomenal concepts—as a prototypical example of a causal view—and Anna Giustina’s account of primitive introspection—as a prototypical example of a constitutive view—is looming in the current controversy between the two families of theories. Towards the end of the essay, we will point to some possible ways for a constitutive theorist to break the stalemate.

Keywords: Introspection, Acquaintance, Phenomenal concepts, Non-conceptual knowledge.

1. Introduction

According to Bertrand Russell (1910; 1912) the notion of knowledge is a disjunctive one that incorporates within itself at least two kinds: *knowledge of things*—or objectual knowledge—and *knowledge of truths*—or propositional knowledge. This distinction between kinds of knowledge is mirrored in the lexical difference between the Italian verbs *conoscere* and *sapere*—*Wissen* and *Kennen* in German, *connaître* and *savoir* in French, et cetera.¹

¹ Benton (2017: footnote 5) remarks that the same lexical distinction can be found also outside the Indo-European language family, for example in Sino-Tibetan and Semitic languages.

Knowledge of truths is the kind of knowledge one has when one knows that something is the case. In knowledge of things, by contrast, what is known is an item rather than a proposition or a number of propositions.

The latter kind of knowledge, in turn, can come in two varieties, namely *knowledge by description* and *knowledge by acquaintance*. Knowledge by description is grounded in the subject's knowledge of at least some propositions about the item she knows. On the other hand, knowledge by acquaintance is simpler than and logically independent from propositional knowledge. It is *direct* knowledge: we know by acquaintance those items we are immediately and directly aware of or—which is the same—those that are directly presented to us. In particular, the relation of acquaintance is both *epistemically* and *metaphysically* direct (see Gertler 2012: 95). It is *epistemically* direct in that one's awareness of the item in question is non-inferential, nor is it dependent upon the awareness of anything else. It is *metaphysically* direct in the sense that one's relation to the item in question is not mediated by anything else (on directness see Russell 1912: 73). This is why knowledge by acquaintance is typically defined as presentational, rather than representational (see Russell 1910: 108). As Raleigh (2019: 2) underlines cogently, acquaintance contrasts with the canonical Brentanian notion of intentionality: the latter is quasi-relational, in the sense that an intentional mental state can be 'about' or 'directed at' non-existent objects; acquaintance, by contrast, is typically understood as a genuine relation holding between a subject and an existing *relatum*.

Since Russell developed the notion of acquaintance, it has played a pivotal role in a number of philosophical debates, spanning from debates concerning the metaphysics of mental states and the mind-body problem (Chalmers 1995; 1996; Balog 2012; Gertler 2007) to debates about foundationalism in epistemology (Bonjour 2001; 2003; Fumerton 1995; 2001; 2019; Horgan and Kriegel 2007; Fales 1996) and even to debates in philosophy of religion (Stump 2010; Keller 2018).² However, in this paper we will be exclusively concerned with the role acquaintance plays in contemporary theories of introspection (Hasan and Fumerton 2020; Gertler 2011; Feldman 2004; DePoe 2018; Conee 1994; Chalmers 2003; Pitt 2004, 2011, 2019; Giustina and Kriegel 2017; Giustina 2021, 2022).

The acquaintance relation has been understood as particularly apt to describe the kind of introspective access we have to phenomenally conscious mental states—namely, mental states there is something it is like for a subject to be in (Nagel 1974).³ These states are conceived as given in a peculiarly immediate way, appearing as they are—according to some authors, even revealing their essential nature (Goff 2017; Trogdon 2016; Liu 2020). In light of this consideration, some authors have argued for the existence of a peculiar form of knowledge partially constituted by the acquaintance relation: primitive introspective knowledge of phenomenal properties (Giustina 2021, 2022; De Vlieger and Giustina 2022; Giustina and Kriegel 2017). In §2 we will distinguish between causal and constitutive accounts of the notion of introspective knowledge by acquaintance. We will also distinguish between a more demanding causal approach and an amended, less committed one. In §3 we will assess a powerful argument that has been provided in favor of a constitutive account according to which the relation of introspective acquaintance *by itself* constitutes a

² For exhaustive accounts of historical and contemporary uses of the notion of acquaintance see Raleigh 2019 and Duncan 2021.

³ Throughout the paper we will be assuming that what one is introspectively acquainted with are one's own phenomenally conscious states.

sui generis kind of knowledge—namely, the argument from epistemic asymmetry (Giustina 2022). We will argue that it does not provide conclusive reasons to prefer a constitutive account over a causal one unless the terms of the debate are clarified. As we will suggest, what appears to be a stalemate between the two views is looming in the current debate. Nonetheless, in §4 we will hint at some possible ways for a constitutive theorist to break the stalemate.

2. Two Readings of Introspective Knowledge by Acquaintance

The very expression “knowledge by acquaintance” is ambiguous. At least two readings of it may be offered: a *causal* reading, and a *constitutive* one (see Giustina 2022: 5). On a causal account the relation of acquaintance is only epistemically relevant since it causes, or enables, or justifies knowledge by acquaintance but it is not *in itself* sufficient for knowledge. Moreover, causal accounts typically take knowledge by acquaintance to be propositional: that is, it is taken to be nothing over and above a corpus of propositional knowledge obtained via the relation of acquaintance. On a typical causal framework, my being directly aware of my present anger would lead me to form the belief that I am angry right now, and/or it would justify that belief. Causal readings are endorsed by the large majority of philosophers who have elaborated on the epistemology of acquaintance (see McGrew 1995, 1999; Chalmers 2003; Gertler 2011; DePoe 2018; Hasan and Fumerton 2020; among others).

On a constitutive account, by contrast, knowledge by acquaintance is a *sui generis* kind of knowledge, where a kind of knowledge is said to be *sui generis* iff it cannot be reduced to other kinds (Giustina 2022). On a constitutive view, being in a conscious state of anger and paying at least a minimal amount of attention to it⁴ would lead me to know the phenomenology of my anger: to know *it*, rather than any proposition *about it*.⁵ Thus, according to constitutive theorists, I can know the phenomenology of my present anger without *knowing that* anger is the ‘thing’ that I am feeling, or even without having any concept of anger whatsoever.

Although still largely considered to be heterodox, constitutive views are now starting to acquire popularity and are embraced by, among others: Duncan (e.g., 2020; 2021), Pitt (2009; 2011; 2019), Coleman (2019), and Giustina (e.g., 2021; 2022). Moreover, this is also the kind of view Russell himself most likely endorsed (1910; 1912).

⁴ The “attention constraint”—as it were—is the reason why most of the constitutive theorists claim that one’s relation of acquaintance with a given experience *partially*—but not *entirely*—constitutes a *sui generis* kind of introspective knowledge. Admittedly, it is hard to quantify precisely what a “minimal amount” of attention would consist of. How much is enough? To our knowledge, there is not a clear answer to this question in the relevant literature, nor do we have a clear answer ourselves. Duncan (2021; 2020: n. 11) notes that while it is plausibly true that paying at least some attention to one’s own experiences is necessary for them to genuinely count as knowledge, getting to know one’s own phenomenal states is not something that usually requires a great deal of mental effort.

⁵ This contrast mirrors Levine’s (2011) distinction between explicit and implicit *self-knowledge of thought*. According to Levine (2011: 108), explicit self-knowledge of thought is the kind of knowledge one has when one explicitly formulates “a meta-cognitive thought, such as ‘I believe that San Francisco is a beautiful city’”, whereas implicit self-knowledge of thought “is not the result of any explicit formulation or reflection. Rather, it’s the knowledge that seems to come with the very thinking of the thought itself. [...] To implicitly know what one is thinking is just to think with understanding”.

At any rate, when it comes to theories about the nature of introspection based on acquaintance, most authors still assume a causal approach. So, although for some conscious mental states (especially sensations such as pains) it is accepted that our introspective access is both metaphysically and epistemically direct, it is taken for granted that introspective knowledge exclusively amounts to knowledge of truths. Introspective knowledge is thus taken to consist in the introspective judgment that is warranted by the relevant direct relation with its truthmaker—i.e., the relevant mental event the judgment is directly tied to and that makes the judgment true (see Gertler 2012). Thus, for example, according to Brie Gertler (2012: 99), “some introspective knowledge consists in judgments that (1) are directly tied to their truthmakers; (2) depend, for their justification, only on the subject’s conscious states at the time of the judgment; and (3) are more strongly justified than any empirical judgments that do not meet conditions (1) and (2)”.

Now, regarding condition (3), to which an acquaintance approach to introspection of the kind we are considering is committed, it is fair to ask how these introspective judgments are justified. Richard Fumerton has proposed a solution that is as elegant as it is demanding: “one has a noninferentially justified belief that P when one has the thought that P and one is acquainted with the fact that P, the thought that P, and the relation of correspondence holding between the thought that P and the fact that P” (Fumerton 1995: 75).⁶ Therefore, according to this view, to have knowledge by acquaintance of the fact that P—e.g., the fact that a certain phenomenal property *F* is instantiated—one has to be acquainted with the fact that P, with the judgment “*F* is now being instantiated”, and with the relation between the fact that P and the judgment, namely, that the former is the truthmaker of the latter.

Russell accompanied the idea of acquaintance as a both metaphysically and epistemically direct cognitive relation with stronger claims such as (i) the idea that the objects of acquaintance are sense data, defined as “the things that are immediately known in sensation” (Russell 1912: 12); (ii) a form of foundationalism based on acquaintance: “Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted” (Russell 1910: 117); (iii) the idea that acquaintance enables perfect and complete knowledge of its objects (Russell 1912: 73). Contemporary causal acquaintance approaches to introspection accept the idea of directedness, but are usually not committed to (i), (ii), or (iii).

As we have seen, another fundamental difference must be highlighted: contemporary causal theories reject *in toto* the idea of a *sui generis* kind of (introspective) knowledge; on the contrary, this family of theories posits that introspective knowledge by acquaintance consists *exclusively* of noninferentially justified occurrent introspective judgments based on the direct awareness of certain elements (at least one experience and a judgment about it, plus possibly the correspondence relationship between the two). This fundamental emendation of Russell’s theory, which was on the contrary centered on irreducible objectual knowledge, seems to us to be motivated by a tacit underlying assumption that has long prevailed, almost unchallenged, in analytic philosophy: any possible piece of knowledge one might ever come to achieve—with the possible exception of knowledge-how⁷—*must be* propositional in kind.

⁶ Laurence Bonjour (2003: 191) has proposed a similar solution: “On my view, [...] a foundational belief results when one directly sees or apprehends that one’s experience satisfies the description of it offered by the content of the belief”.

⁷ But see Williamson 2002 for an account of knowledge-how as knowledge of propositions.

However, despite the obvious theoretical advantages of an approach that stands in continuity with most views about the nature of knowledge, contemporary causal approaches inevitably face some challenges when it comes to satisfy what can be labeled as the *phenomenological adequacy constraint*. In the attempt to meet such a constraint, causal accounts of knowledge by acquaintance end up necessarily dropping some commitments concerning justification.

As we saw above, the account of introspective knowledge proposed by Fumerton (1995) and Bonjour (2003) prescribes that in order to achieve knowledge by acquaintance of the fact that a phenomenal property F is being instantiated a subject must be directly aware of (i) the aforementioned fact, (ii) the introspective judgment "F is now being instantiated" and (iii) the correspondence/truthmaking/satisfaction relation between (i) and (ii).⁸

Admittedly, this account of how (some of) our introspective judgments are justified is highly complex and extremely demanding (see Gertler 2012: 112-13; Feldman 2006). It just seems implausible to say that for the introspection of one's experience to yield genuine knowledge about its target one *must* be aware of the correspondence between the thought that p and the fact the thought expresses.

This implausibility seems to us to be first and foremost phenomenological in nature.⁹ An account of the introspective access we have to our experiences should at the very least be phenomenologically adequate. By "phenomenological adequacy" we mean that such an account should be faithful to the phenomenal character of the experience in question, that is, it should accurately describe what it is like to undergo it. Now, intuitively, acquaintance with the correspondence between the suitable judgment that P and the fact that P just does not seem to be phenomenologically apparent to the introspector who introspectively knows that P by acquaintance.

Assuming that introspective knowledge is propositional knowledge, causal accounts must combine the idea of a direct link between a judgment and a phenomenally conscious mental state with an explanation of how the latter can be conceptualized. Moreover, such an explanation should be phenomenologically adequate. To meet the phenomenological adequacy constraint authors like McGrew (1995, 1999), Gertler (2001), Chalmers (2003) and Feldman (2006) have offered an amended version of a causal account of introspective knowledge by acquaintance, which drops the requirement of acquaintance with an epistemically relevant relation between a judgment and its truthmaker. Amended views of this kind attempt to explain how these phenomenal beliefs—i.e., beliefs about the phenomenal properties of one's own current conscious states (Giustina and Kriegel 2017)—can be strongly justified by insisting on the direct tie they have with the

⁸ Though Fumerton's account and Bonjour's differ in how the direct awareness of this correspondence relation is conceived. Fumerton thinks it is acquaintance with a fact, while Bonjour (2003: 73-4) considers "direct recognition" of the 'fit' between the fact and the corresponding belief to be itself judgmental. Clearly, this latter position runs the risk of a regress *ad infinitum* (cf. Hasan and Fumerton 2020).

⁹ A very similar objection was raised by Koksvik (2011: 195) against Chudnoff's account of the justification-conferring phenomenology of experiences. According to Chudnoff, "if your perceptual experience representing that p justifies you in believing that p, then it does so because it has presentational phenomenology with respect to p" (Chudnoff 2013: 94) and "what it is for an experience of yours to have presentational phenomenology with respect to p is for it to both make it seem to you that p and make it seem to you as if this experience makes you aware of a truth-maker for p" (Chudnoff 2013: 37).

relevant phenomenal properties.¹⁰ The prevailing strategy centers on a non-standard understanding of the idea of demonstrative reference (see Hasan and Fumerton 2020): by attending to an experience one can refer to it demonstratively, thus securing a substantial epistemic grasp of the appearance as an appearance of a certain kind. David Chalmers has named a similar grasp of the phenomenal character of an experience a *direct phenomenal concept* (DPC) “the clearest cases of direct phenomenal concept arise when a subject attends to the quality of an experience, and forms a concept wholly based on the attention to the quality, ‘taking up’ the quality into the concept” (Chalmers 2003: 235). Chalmers, as well as the other authors mentioned above, thinks that acquaintance with phenomenal properties fixes the reference of a special kind of phenomenal concepts—DPCs—that are used to build noninferentially justified phenomenal beliefs.¹¹ Someone might be inclined to equate DPCs with a case of ordinary demonstratives. However, it is worth underlining that there are important differences between the former and the latter. The referent of a demonstrative concept is fixed by a demonstration and/or an intention to point to some object plus some contextual features (see,

¹⁰ Against an amended version of the causal account, there seems to be no room to appeal to an argument that Matt Duncan (2021) has used to criticize the idea that the only role played by experience in knowledge acquisition is a justificatory one. According to this idea, the perceptual experience of a subject who sees a tiger at the zoo justifies her beliefs about the tiger. On the contrary, according to Duncan (2021), this is not the best explanation of what he calls the “epistemic oomph” of experience. That is the case because, as Ned Block’s ‘superblindsight’ case demonstrates, it is possible to have justified beliefs *sans* experience: “sensory and cognitive processing of information from my environment would be, all by itself and regardless of whether it involved experience, enough to justify my beliefs about the tiger” (Duncan 2021: 4). Duncan uses this argument to say that the best explanation of the epistemic oomph of experience is precisely a constitutive reading of knowledge by acquaintance, according to which experience *is* knowledge. Unfortunately, however, this argument seems to work only for perceptual beliefs and does not seem to be generalizable to introspective knowledge by acquaintance *tout court*. In fact, the causal theorists’ main claim is that acquaintance with phenomenal properties of experience justifies our *phenomenal* beliefs, beliefs about the qualitative properties of experience. Therefore, in these cases it makes no sense to say that phenomenal beliefs can be justified in the absence of the relevant experiences.

¹¹ An anonymous reviewer raised a doubt as to whether ‘causal’ and ‘constitutive’ really are the most adequate labels for the views they refer to. In fact, on Chalmers’ causal approach, the experience in question *constitutes* one’s DPC, thereby getting to constitute, in turn, a direct phenomenal belief. We agree with the reviewer on this point. We think that a possible alternative would be to employ David Pitt’s (e.g., 2011; 2019) distinction between propositional knowledge by acquaintance and what he calls *acquaintance-as-knowledge* or simply acquaintance-knowledge. We think Pitt’s position could be viable, in that it avoids the ambiguity entailed by the use of the preposition ‘by’ in the expression ‘knowledge by acquaintance’. Nonetheless, Pitt’s nomenclature has its own problems. It attributes a specific technical meaning to the expression ‘knowledge by acquaintance’, thereby identifying it with a subset of its possible interpretations. However, that notion has been widely used across a number of philosophical debates over the last century. For this reason, and since we could not come up with a better pair of labels ourselves, we decided to stick to Giustina’s (2022) causal/constitutive one.

e.g., Hasan and Fumerton 2020), whereas the content of a DPC is constituted by the quality one is acquainted with.¹²

At any rate, an amended version of a causal account of introspective knowledge by acquaintance promises to offer an explanation of the role of acquaintance in our introspective knowledge that rests upon a more unified conception of knowledge. On these views, the only possible kinds of knowledge available to a subject are propositional knowledge and practical knowledge. Moreover, potential analyses in terms of more simple basic elements are available for propositional knowledge—e.g., accounts that attempt to analyze propositional knowledge in terms of (Gettier-proof) justified true beliefs (Giustina 2022). Mostly, if not exclusively, for these reasons, over the last decades, causal approaches have been preferred over constitutive ones.

Specularly, constitutive accounts may be charged with (at least) two lines of criticism: (i) they rest upon a disunified conception of knowledge which unnecessarily multiplies disjunctions. Other things being equal, a more unified approach should be preferred; (ii) they rest upon mysterious notions such as “non-conceptual knowledge” or “primitive introspection”, which allegedly cannot be analyzed in terms of any simpler idea (see Giustina 2022).

This paper will be mostly concerned with (i). According to Giustina (2022: 18): “the main response to the objection from disunity is that, even if the non-reductive account is less unified than the reductive account, this would be a little cost compared to its greater explanatory advantage”. However, we will argue that the controversy between causal and constitutive accounts might, at least in part, rest on a verbal dispute, so that the two are equivalent in explanatory power.

In the last section, we will say a few words regarding charges of mysteriousness against constitutive views.

3. The Stalemate

According to objection (i), *ceteris paribus*, we should prefer a unified account in which the notion of knowledge refers to a unitary phenomenon over a disunified

¹² Sosa raised a concern about demonstrative concepts and, consequently, about (introspective) judgments constructed from them. The content of indexical concepts would be too thin: “not much follows from their mere content” (Sosa 2003: 125). An analogous concern has been raised against Brian Loar’s (1997) account of phenomenal concepts as type-demonstratives. However, whether DPCs are to be taken as a type of demonstrative concepts is controversial. As a matter of fact, Chalmers (2003: 227) explicitly states that while there is a close connection between pure phenomenal concepts in general—of which DPCs are a subset—and demonstrative ones, one should resist the temptation to equate the two. Or rather (2003: 227): pure phenomenal concepts may be thought of as a special kind of demonstratives, as long as the relevant distinctions between the two are kept clear. Chalmers assumes a two-factor/Fregean account of reference whereby the referent and the “cognitive significance” of a concept—i.e., its sense—are distinct. That DPCs cannot be equated to mere demonstratives/indexical ones is demonstrated by the cognitive significance of a belief of the form “THIS is SO-AND-SO” for a subject entertaining it, where <THIS> is a demonstrative and <SO-AND-SO> is a DPC. Both <THIS> and <SO-AND-SO> in the judgment above have the same referent, namely something like “the quality I am acquainted with right now”. However, they characterize such referent in different ways—thereby having a different sense. While the former concept characterizes its referent only relationally, the latter characterizes the same property directly, intrinsically and substantially, that is, in terms of how the quality feels.

one which unnecessarily adds a disjunction. However, even if a constitutive account of introspective knowledge by acquaintance were to turn as more disunified than a causal/reductive one, this might seem a small price to pay compared to the greater explanatory power of the former, especially considering that we are not talking about a proliferation of disjunctions, but rather of adding just one more disjunct (see Giustina 2022: 17). In particular, Giustina believes that the explanatory advantage of a constitutive account lies in its capacity to offer an explanation of instances of *epistemic asymmetry* between subjects which allegedly cannot be exhaustively explained by an appeal to differences in their propositional knowledge.¹³

By an epistemic asymmetry Giustina (2022: 9) means a situation in which at least one of the two subjects involved has a certain amount of (non-propositional) information at her disposal which the other has not. Following Shannon (1948) and Dretske (1981), the notion of information is here understood as reduction of epistemic uncertainty or, which is the same, as exclusion of epistemic possibilities. The larger the amount of information one obtains, the greater the number of epistemic possibilities one will be able to exclude. Thus, by getting acquainted with a given experience, according to Giustina (2022) one is *eo ipso* put in a position to exclude all the epistemic possibilities—i.e., possible ways the actual world might turn out to be—in which one is not having an experience with *that* phenomenal character. Crucially, whilst for Giustina this is to be regarded as a cognitive achievement in itself, it does not yet involve the deployment nor the formation of relevant concepts. One does not have to classify a given phenomenal character one is acquainted with—i.e., recognize it as belonging to a certain phenomenal-experience-type—to discard certain epistemic possibilities.¹⁴ This point will prove crucial in the following discussion. As we shall see Chalmers (e.g., 2003: 16) conceives DPCs as those concepts which, by “taking up” the peculiar quality of an experience into their content, just allow a subject to distinguish that experience from other current or past ones.

Giustina’s (2022) argument for the best explanation of cases of epistemic asymmetry goes roughly as follows. People who suffer from a rare pathological condition called congenital insensitivity to pain—also known as congenital

¹³ For expository reasons we decided to compare just one argument in favor of a constitutive account with a paradigmatic causal framework. We decided to pick Giustina’s view as a prototypical example of a constitutive reading because she explicitly offers a theory of the role of acquaintance in *introspection*, whereas another constitutive theorist such as Duncan (2020) is mostly concerned with *perceptual* knowledge by acquaintance. Nonetheless, we believe the arguments offered in Duncan 2020 might support a constitutive reading of knowledge by acquaintance *tout court*.

¹⁴ This seems to mirror the remarks Dretske (1969) draws, although he is exclusively concerned with perceptual experiences. There, Dretske draws a distinction between *simple seeing* and *epistemic seeing*. A subject *S* simply sees an object *O* when she is able to differentiate *O* from its immediate environment just in virtue of how *O* looks to her, that is, immediately and non-inferentially. Note that for Dretske one does not have to identify—i.e., *know*—what is it that she is seeing in order to be able to differentiate it from its immediate surroundings. In order for a subject to know that *O* is *F*, some conditions must hold: (1) *S* must simply see *O*; (2) *O* must be *F*; (3) the conditions under which *S* simply sees *O* must be such that *O* could not—under those conditions—but look as *F* to *S*; (4) *S* must believe (3) to obtain; (5) *S* must believe *O* to be *F*.

analgesia—are prevented from having the experience of physical pain. Imagine trying to get someone who’s affected by congenital analgesia to know what it is like to have a painful experience. Arguably, you will not be able to offer an informative, non-trivial characterization of the peculiar qualitative character of painful experiences: there will always be something crucial the congenital analgesic is missing.

The same point can be illustrated by means of a counterfactual scenario (Giustina 2022). Imagine a metaphysically possible world, call it NON-CONCEPTUAL EARTH, populated with creatures whose cognitive architecture does not allow for the formation of any kind of concept whatsoever. Take now two subjects in NON-CONCEPTUAL EARTH, call them Jimmy and Saul: while Jimmy has felt pain (and paid attention to his painful experience) at least once in his life, Saul is a congenital analgesic. According to Giustina there would still be an epistemic asymmetry between Jimmy and Saul which, by assumption, cannot be explained away by an appeal to differences in the amount of conceptual knowledge they have.

Here it is worth noting, however, that a causal theorist might settle for a view that is far more modest than a metaphysical thesis whereby all kinds of knowledge one might have must be conceptual *in any possible world*: for her, establishing that our introspective knowledge by acquaintance is propositional *in the actual world* is already enough. However, a constitutive theorist might correctly reply that, intuitively, insofar as we are talking about the nature of knowledge, and whether the notion of knowledge picks a unified kind or not, metaphysical possibilities are relevant.¹⁵

A more plausible reply on the part of the causal theorist might rely on Chalmers’s (e.g., 2003) definition of DPCs. That definition is far less committal than the way in which Giustina (2022) defines (phenomenal) concepts tout court. According to Chalmers (2003), having a DPC per se does not allow the subject to classify and/or recognize an experience as belonging to a certain type: in order to do so one needs at the very least a successor of the relevant DPC, namely a concept that retains part of content of the latter even after the experience has disappeared: a standing phenomenal concept. On the other hand, Giustina defines phenomenal concepts in general as “personal-level mental representations that enable the subject to (i) distinguish the experience they are currently introspecting from other current or past experiences and (ii) recognize it as an instance of a certain experience type” (2021: 413).

Now, a causal theorist can give two alternative stories concerning the process of formation of DPCs:

- (a) *automatic formation*: the formation of the relevant DPC is automatic, as it were. That is, just by being acquainted with the quality of an experience and paying focal attention to it, a subject eo ipso forms a DPC—that is, one could not but form it.
- (b) *non-automatic deployment*: a DPC is something a subject forms deliberately or, at least, *ceteris paribus*—i.e., having direct attentive awareness of an experience—one might or might not form the corresponding DPC.

If the formation and the deployment of DPCs were taken to be non-automatic, then the constitutive theorist would have a card to play. Granted (i) that forming a DPC is something one may or may not do and (ii) that the acquisition of the

¹⁵ Thanks to Matt Duncan for suggesting this point to us.

relevant piece of phenomenal information must be prior to the formation of the DPC it is clear that it is the acquisition of the personal-level available information, rather than the formation of the DPC, which would level out the epistemic asymmetry, as demonstrated by the NON-CONCEPTUAL EARTH argument.

The automatic-formation constraint—from now on AFC—avoids this problem by claiming that being acquainted with a certain experience and paying focal attention to it simpliciter leads one to the formation of the relevant DPC. An argument for AFC might go as follows:

- (1) a DPC is formed via a kind of demonstrative act that embeds the quality one is acquainted with into the content of the concept (see Chalmers 2003: 236-37; Gertler 2001: 312).
- (2) introspective attention is in itself a peculiar kind of demonstration, i.e., a demonstration that is not mediated by any description.
- (3) an act of introspective attention alone is sufficient for the formation of a DPC.

At any rate, sticking to the letter of Chalmers (2003) and Gertler (2001), AFC appears to follow as the most straightforward conclusion. Recall that for Chalmers (2003: 235; our emphasis) DPCs are “*wholly* based on the attention to the quality”; likewise, for Gertler (2001: 323, our emphasis) “pure demonstrative reference is achieved by *attention alone*, without any mediating description”.¹⁶ Thus, on the most immediate interpretation of the notion of DPCs these are wholly constituted by focal attention to the relevant qualities.

Indeed, it is not intuitively clear what additional cognitive act, as distinct from the demonstrative act constituted by focal attentiveness to the quality, might be a further necessary condition for the formation of a DPC.

In light of the far more modest definition of ‘conceptuality’ deployed, and in virtue of AFC, a causal theorist might deem as incoherent a world in which attending to an experience does not put one in a position to form a DPC. Hence the counterfactual scenario described above would not be of any use for the constitutive theorist.

To summarize, so far, the divergence between a constitutive view and a causal one endorsing AFC seems mostly definitional in that it has to do with how the notion of ‘conceptuality’ is understood. This leads to a stalemate between the two approaches. For Chalmers (2003), being in a position to exclude certain epistemic possibilities already suffices for the possession of a DPC, whereas for Giustina (2022) introspective knowledge by acquaintance, at least at its primitive level, is not conceptual for it does not allow the subject to recognize her experience as belonging to a certain experience-type. It is on the basis of such a rich definition of conceptuality that Giustina is allowed to say that primitive introspective knowledge by acquaintance is utterly non-conceptual. By contrast, a causal theorist endorsing AFC

¹⁶ Although it is controversial whether Chalmers’ DPCs and Gertler’s pure demonstratives are equivalent in scope. See Wu 2014: 269 for skepticism about a substantial distinction between (pure) demonstratives and DPCs.

and adopting Chalmers' rather loose and idiosyncratic definition of DPCs, is allowed to say that introspective knowledge by acquaintance is conceptual.¹⁷

Incidentally, a constitutive theorist might raise the following point: true, a constitutive account of introspective knowledge by acquaintance rests on a disjunctive notion of knowledge. However, by appealing to DPCs, Chalmers' approach seems to disunify the notion of phenomenal concepts.

At any rate, a causal theorist endorsing AFC would argue that, provided that scenarios like NON-CONCEPTUAL EARTH are incoherent, cases of epistemic asymmetry can be handled without any recourse to non-propositional kinds of knowledge. What really does the job of explaining cases like the one described above, is the fact that the congenital analgesic lacks a concept of a peculiar kind, namely a DPC, nor is she able to form any concept of this sort. In fact, the relation of attentive introspective acquaintance gets one in direct contact with a specific quality; such quality is then "taken up" into a DPC, thus getting to constitute its content.¹⁸ Since DPCs can only get their content via acquaintance with experiences, by definition the congenital analgesic is prevented from forming a DPC. DPCs, in turn, constitute direct phenomenal beliefs. The latter are beliefs of the form 'THIS is SO-AND-SO' where <THIS> is a demonstrative that points towards the experience in question, whereas <SO-AND-SO> is a DPC whose content is partially constituted by the specific quality of a given experience.

According to a constitutive theorist, getting acquainted with an experience puts a subject in a position to exclude a number of epistemic possibilities. This is why introspective acquaintance constitutes a peculiar kind of knowledge. The fact is, though, that a causal theorist endorsing AFC can accommodate the newly acquired capacity of the subject to reduce uncertainty just as well. It is clear from what Chalmers (2003) says that the possession of a DPC constrains the space of epistemic possibilities. Take a conscious experiencer, say Mary, and her inverted twin. Let now R be a DPC associated with the phenomenology Mary is acquainted with when seeing a red object—a "reddish" phenomenology—and G be a DPC

¹⁷ A constitutivist might reply that even though both her view and Chalmers' are able to explain cases of epistemic asymmetry, there are independent arguments which may be provided in favor of a constitutive approach. In particular, she might appeal to the so-called argument from phenomenal concepts acquisition (see Giustina 2021). According to such an argument, if all introspective states were conceptual, we could not explain how at least our most basic phenomenal concepts are acquired via introspection. The only alternative to this would be a very implausible form of nativism whereby all those concepts—including concepts like <PHENOMENAL RED> or <MELANCHOLY>—were innately possessed by us. Let us notice, however, that this argument does not by itself break the stalemate we are pointing to. If, again, one equates 'conceptual' with 'classificatory', then yes: Chalmers' account would not be able to explain how those concepts can be acquired via introspection. However, by stipulation, DPCs are *not* classificatory. Hence, Chalmers (2003) can explain the acquisition of (pure) phenomenal concepts: the quality of an experience is taken up into a DPC, and then is retained by the corresponding standing phenomenal concept.

¹⁸ A constitutivist might reply that a causal theorist is still in need of an explanation of what it takes for acquaintance to constitute a DPC (see e.g., Giustina 2022: 14-15). Instead, she might claim to be in a position to explain this: the non-propositional phenomenal information obtained via introspective acquaintance constitutes the content of the relevant concept. Again, however, on the basis of Chalmers' definition of DPCs (see, e.g., his 2003: 16), a causal theorist endorsing AFC might very well accept that.

associated with the phenomenology Inverted-Mary is acquainted with when seeing the same object—a “greenish” phenomenology. Chalmers (2003: 232-33) says:

This can be illustrated by seeing how the concepts in question are used to constrain epistemic possibilities. [...] Mary’s concept R and Inverted Mary’s concept G differ not just in their referents but also in their epistemic contents. When Mary leaves the monochromatic room and acquires the confident belief (under her pure phenomenal concept) that tomatoes cause red experiences, she is thereby in a position to rule out the epistemic possibility that tomatoes cause experiences with quality G. The only epistemic possibilities compatible with her belief are those in which tomatoes cause R experiences.

In light of how Chalmers characterizes DPCs, that the relation of acquaintance with a given conscious particular by itself provides the subject with the capacity to exclude certain epistemic possibilities is something that a causal theorist endorsing AFC would accept. The only point of contention is whether this is enough to regard acquaintance in itself as a peculiar kind of knowledge.

At this point, the constitutive theorist would reply along the following lines. If what does the job of bridging the epistemic asymmetry is not the formation of a direct phenomenal belief, but rather the acquisition of a DPC, then we would *de facto* be dealing with a dispute between two different *constitutive* accounts: one—the “AFC approach”—in which acquaintance necessarily involves a peculiar kind of conceptualization, and another—the “primitive introspection approach”—in which it does not do so. The only way for a causal theorist to defend her position would then be to claim that what is automatically formed in focally attentive awareness of one’s experiences is not only a DPC, but also the whole corresponding direct phenomenal belief.¹⁹ Then, a constitutive theorist might grant that introspective acquaintance is conceptual but nonetheless reiterate the abductive argument from epistemic asymmetry against a causal view by building a slightly different counterfactual scenario: NON-PROPOSITIONAL EARTH. In this possible world, people cannot form any kind of belief. Take now Jimmy* and Saul* in NON-PROPOSITIONAL EARTH: while Jimmy* has had a painful experience, paid attention to it and hence automatically formed a DPC, Saul* is a congenital analgesic. *Prima facie*, there is still an asymmetry between Jimmy* and Saul*: arguably, Jimmy* has acquired a certain amount of non-propositional, tough conceptual, information, which Saul* has not. Hence, the constitutivist is in a position to claim that the best explanation of the asymmetry is that there is a kind of knowledge which, although constituted by a concept of a special kind—DPC—is nonetheless irreducible to propositional one.

Let us notice, however, that whether a scenario like NON-PROPOSITIONAL EARTH really is conceivable might be a matter of controversy. In fact, a causalist might deem a possible world in which subjects have the relevant concepts but lack the cognitive architecture that would allow them to embed those concepts within a propositional structure as incoherent or at least hard to make sense of. What appears to be contentious is the ideal conceivability of a subject who has a cognitive architecture such that she can form two co-referential concepts—i.e., a

¹⁹ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing us on this point.

demonstrative concept and a DPC—but cannot “hold them together”, as it were, in a direct phenomenal belief. What should such a subject lack?

Now, the inconceivability of the aforementioned scenario commits the causalist to one of two alternative positions: (I) direct attentive awareness of a phenomenal quality necessarily entails the formation both of a DPC and a direct phenomenal belief. That is, every time one attends to the phenomenal character of her experience, one *eo ipso* forms the belief “THIS is SO-AND-SO”; (II) Although forming a DPC necessarily puts one in a position to embed it within the corresponding direct phenomenal belief, the formation of the latter is not automatic. That is, by having a DPC, necessarily, one can form the belief “THIS is SO-AND-SO” but one does not *need* to.

(I) is coherent and views in its vicinity are not entirely absent from the debate. For instance, Wu (2014), Byrne (2016) and Siegel (2017) have articulated accounts which are close—even though not identical—to what (I) states. Wayne Wu thinks that “attention to a phenomenal feature is sufficient for embedding it in a judgment, a constitutive relation that allows for a distinctive sort of direct reference to that feature” (Wu 2014: 264). Byrne (2016) claims that beliefs are constitutive components of experiences, i.e., experiencing as if *p* entails believing that *p*. Likewise, Siegel (2017: 33) argues that, at least in some cases, beliefs may arise passively, that is, “one could believe *P* by endorsing an experience with content *P*”. Notwithstanding, (I) is indeed a rather strong, fairly minoritarian and, arguably, quite controversial claim. The implausibility of (I) is both phenomenological and cognitive²⁰. First, DPCs are partially constituted by a phenomenal quality—which is conscious by definition. Direct phenomenal beliefs, in turn, are constituted by a DPC. It follows that if the formation of a direct phenomenal belief were automatic, then a belief of the form “THIS is SO-AND-SO” could not occur unconsciously, that is, it would need to be phenomenally manifest in every experience one is attentively aware of. Intuitively, though, this is not the case. Moreover, even if one conceded that direct phenomenal beliefs could occur unconsciously, the causalist would still owe us an explanation of why and how at least some of them become conscious. Crucially, the required explanation cannot appeal to the role of conscious attention, on the pain of circularity. Secondly, (I) would imply an unlikely proliferation of beliefs; it would lead to a considerable overload of our cognitive system and make this account very uneconomical.

Phenomenologically and cognitively speaking, (II) appears to be a much more plausible thesis. Nonetheless, in response to (II), a constitutivist might still claim that even if one is necessarily put in a position to form a direct phenomenal

²⁰ However, while throughout the paper we have been exclusively concerned with introspective knowledge by acquaintance, both Byrne and Siegel seem to be mostly concerned with beliefs about the external world. Moreover, even if it were the case that experiencing as if *p* entails believing that *p*—as Byrne claims—arguably the concepts that constitute the belief that *p* must already be possessed by the subject *prior* to the experience. This contrasts with the idea of AFC as we have characterized it above. In fact, Byrne (2016) does not claim, and it would be implausible to claim, that having an experience as of a pink pig suffices alone for the formation of the concept <PIG>. At best, having an experience might automatically involve the *deployment* of certain concepts. What we have said regarding Byrne’s (2016) view holds, we think, for Siegel’s (2017) one as well. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for having raised this point.

belief, the mere fact of having formed a DPC via attentive acquaintance already counts as knowledge. However, to defend her position, the constitutivist needs an argument that is independent from the counterfactual cases whose conceivability the causalist contests. Otherwise, she would beg the question against the causalist. Overall, absent independent arguments in favor of a constitutive account, the dispute seems to run aground into a stalemate in which each of the two parties involved merely assumes a certain definition of what counts as knowledge.²¹

4. How to Overcome the Stalemate

A causal account of introspective knowledge by acquaintance endorsing AFC promises to offer an explanation of why and how our phenomenal beliefs can be strongly justified that stands in continuity with mainstream views in analytic epistemology. We cannot but notice, however, that it can do so only at the price of adopting a rather convoluted theory of how some of our phenomenal concepts—DPCs—are acquired and deployed. Let us recall that according to AFC the formation of a DPC is automatic, that is, by being attentively aware of an experience, one cannot but form a DPC. It is indeed plausible that as a result of learning processes of varying complexity, the acquisition and the deployment of concepts of various kinds can be automatic in the sense of being almost effortless and non-deliberate. However, to our knowledge the idea that consciously attending a present experience suffices alone for the formation of a concept, is relatively minoritarian in the literature and piggybacks on an inflationist conception of conceptuality. Remember that DPCs last just as long as the corresponding experience lasts and characterize their referents intrinsically and substantially.

In addition, for her theory to be at least equivalent to a constitutivist' in terms of explanatory power, the causalist is committed to adopt a strong metaphysical interpretation²² of the notion of “automaticity”. It is not enough for her to admit that the expression 'automatic formation' merely indicates a nomological—i.e., valid in our world—correlation between direct attentive awareness and the formation of a DPC. In fact, a constitutivist might retort that such a correlation is explained by some contingent facts about our cognitive architecture, but that a world in which direct attentive awareness does not *eo ipso* lead to the formation of a DPC is at least conceivable.

²¹ Incidentally, both views seem to capture a duality of our intuitions, as it were, according to which while on the one hand we are in a privileged epistemic position with respect to the phenomenology of our own conscious states, on the other hand introspective errors and misjudgments are possible and quite frequent. According to a constitutive theorist, we “acquaintance-know” what it is like to be in a conscious state, but we can misclassify the token state as belonging to the wrong type. According to a causal theorist, in turn, some of our introspective judgments are strongly justified in virtue of their being directly tied to the their truthmakers via a DPC, whereas most of our introspective judgments do not reach such a level of justification, as a direct link between the phenomenal concepts composing the phenomenal belief in question and the experience which those concepts refer to is not always maintained—or not always to the same degree.

²² How to spell out the nature of the relation between direct attentive awareness and DPCs—e.g., whether in terms of identity, grounding or constitution—is an open question. It is beyond the scope of this paper to adjudicate this metaphysical issue. Thanks to Anna Giustina for having raised this point.

In light of all this, a constitutivist might want to argue that a more plausible option would be to think that attention is necessary but still *not sufficient* for the formation of a DPC, in that the latter requires demonstrative attention to the quality in question *plus* a further cognitive act distinct from attention.²³ Arguably, it is up to the constitutive theorist to spell out in more clear terms what exactly this additional cognitive act consists of. Crucially, the latter cannot coincide with a judgment of the form “THIS is THUS-AND-SO”, on the pain of regress: in fact, that judgment would already require the deployment of a DPC.

At any rate, even if one granted that attention alone suffices for conceptualization, as we have seen under a causal approach conceptualization would not yet be sufficient for knowledge: in order to have knowledge of the phenomenal quality in question, one would have to form an introspective judgment. Nonetheless, we have shown that in order to strengthen her case against the causalist, the constitutivist needs an argument that is independent from counterfactual scenarios like NON-CONCEPTUAL EARTH and NON-PROPOSITIONAL EARTH, on the pain of begging the question.

As we have argued, by dropping AFC, a causal approach would end up seeing its explanatory power reduced. In fact, without AFC such an account would not be able to explain situations in which subjects differ in the amount of information they have at their disposal prior to the formation of the relevant DPC.

A constitutive account is not committed to any *ad hoc* notion. Moreover, while there might be independent reasons in favor of a constitutive account (see below), as far as we can see the only reason to commit oneself to concepts of such a peculiar kind as DPCs is to explain the role of acquaintance in the formation of phenomenal beliefs without admitting *sui generis* kinds of knowledge.²⁴ Nonetheless, a constitutive theorist should insist on rebutting charges of mysteriousness with respect to notions such as ‘primitive introspection’ and the like. Although non-conceptualism is a well-established and respected position in the theory of mental content (see Bermúdez and Cahen 2020), many philosophers are still uncomfortable with the idea of non-conceptual knowledge. As Frank Hofmann (2014: 201) has glossed, “we are still in the grip of the Sellarsian dilemma which tends to put non-propositional states outside of epistemology”.

Regarding the notion of acquaintance, here it is worth noting that Giustina (e.g., 2022: 17-20) seems to equate the notion of ‘mysteriousness’ with that of ‘unanalyzability’. As a matter of fact, though, many acquaintance theorists have attempted to break down the notion of acquaintance in terms of more simple ones

²³ In personal conversation Chalmers admitted that the view which best reflects his current inclination allows for the possibility of demonstratively attending to a quality without forming a DPC. In his opinion, in order to form a DPC one’s acquaintance with the quality in question needs to be abstracted into a conceptual grasp of the relevant state of some kind. However, it is quite hard to get a clear idea of what this putative cognitive component might consist of. Perhaps a viable option—which was suggested to us by Anna Giustina—might be to claim that in order to conceptualize the quality one is acquainted with, the subject has to represent it as belonging to a maximally determined phenomenal type. However, this line of argument should be further developed.

²⁴ As suggested by an anonymous reviewer, another reason to commit to DPCs might be that, to account for epistemic significance one needs concepts—regardless of whether they are used to form a judgment. This view might be compatible with the conceptual version of a constitutive approach.

such as ‘embedding’ (Gertler 2001), ‘quotation’ (Balog 2012), ‘partial constitution’ (Williford 2015) and ‘content and attitude’ (Kriegel, forth.). Nonetheless, the equation of mysteriousness with unanalyzability seems to confer a negative connotation to the latter notion. Even if one maintains that the relation of acquaintance cannot be analyzed in terms of simpler ones, that a notion is primitive in this sense does not imply that it is mysterious. The Merriam-Webster web dictionary defines a mystery as ‘something not understood or beyond understanding’. Now consider some notions like ‘point’, ‘segment’, ‘set’ or ‘the number zero’. Several axiomatic foundations in mathematics take those notions to be primitive in the sense of not being definable in terms of already defined ones. Yet the notion of a set is hardly beyond understanding.

The constitutivist needs to gather independent arguments that provide reasons for departing from the orthodoxy of contemporary epistemology, according to which knowledge is exclusively propositional (with sporadic exceptions such as knowledge-how).

Matt Duncan (2020; 2023) has developed several arguments to the case that most “hallmarks” of ordinary propositional knowledge belong also to phenomenal experience per se. In particular, he (e.g., 2020: 122) argues that our perceptual awareness of properties oftentimes plays distinctively epistemic roles that are typically associated with propositional knowledge; for instance, it functions as the basis of one’s reasoning. Since in order to have knowledge of something by reasoning one must know the bases of her reasoning, it follows that knowledge can be constituted by perceptual awareness of properties. The arguments put forth in Pitt 2004, 2009, 2019 for the existence of a distinctive, proprietary and individuable form of cognitive phenomenology, those offered in Hofmann 2014 for non-conceptual perceptual knowledge and those proposed in Benton 2017 for evidence of the existence of knowledge of things in ordinary language also seem to go in the right direction. Furthermore, we think that possible future work in experimental philosophy might shed light on the general public’s intuitions regarding the existence of non-propositional knowledge of things.²⁵

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²⁵ We would like to express our gratitude to Matt Duncan, Alfredo Tomasetta, Anna Giustina, David Chalmers, participants at the 17th Creph Annual Seminar in Liège, members of the EXRE research group in Fribourg, as well as to two anonymous reviewers for very helpful comments on various drafts of this paper.

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