

Experience is Knowledge

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One way in which consciousness is valuable has to do with its role in generating *knowledge* of the world. Experience has epistemic oomph. Or, at least, it seems like it does. That is, it seems like experience plays a positive—even essential—role in generating some knowledge. For example, suppose I see a tiger before me. I thus come to know about the tiger. And it seems like, in this case, as in others like it, my visual experience plays a positive—perhaps even essential—role in generating my knowledge of the tiger.

The problem is, it's not clear what that role is. To see this, suppose that when my visual system takes in information about the tiger it skips the experience step and just automatically and immediately generates the belief in me that there is a tiger before me. A lot of philosophers think that, in such a case, I would (or at least could) still know, via perception, that there is a tiger before me. But then that raises the question: What epistemic role was the *experience* playing? How did *it* contribute to my having knowledge of the tiger?

Philosophers have given many different answers to these questions.¹ But, for various reasons, none of them has really stuck.² In this paper I'll offer and defend a different answer to these questions—a solution to the problem—which avoids the pitfalls of previous answers, does not require commitment to certain controversial theses entailed by other solutions, and allows that experience has an even deeper, more extensive epistemic significance than others have realized or suggested. I'll argue that experience has epistemic oomph because experience is, all by itself, a kind of knowledge—it's what Bertrand Russell (1912) calls “knowledge of things”. So, on this view, experience helps generate knowledge by *being* knowledge.

Here's the game plan. First, I'll describe the debate over the epistemic oomph/significance of experience and briefly evaluate some of the main positions within it. Then I'll stake out my position

¹ For a detailed overview of this debate, see Byrne (2016), Siegel and Silins (2015), or Johnston (2006). In some way or other, all of these philosophers trace the contemporary debate over the epistemic significance/oomph of experience to Donald Davidson (1986).

² Mark Johnston (2006) goes as far as to say, “Contemporary philosophy has no good answer to the question: what is the function of sensory awareness as opposed to immediate perceptual judgment?” (p. 260).

and defend it against objections. My aim here isn't to move partisans from their platforms. It's rather to give a good alternative to undecideds—to those seeking a different candidate explanation for the epistemic value of experience.

1. The Epistemic Oomph of Experience

Start with a case. I see a tiger at a zoo. As a result, I know various things about that tiger—its approximate size, shape, and color; and also just that it's there at the zoo. And my seeing the tiger—my visually experiencing it—is part of the explanation for how I know these things. For example, if someone asked me whether there is a tiger at the zoo, I'd say, "Yes"; if they asked me how I know, I'd say, "Because I *saw* it". My experience is a key player in this epistemic story. I saw and then I knew, and I knew *because* I saw.³

Furthermore, it's natural to think that my seeing the tiger—my having a visual experience of it—is not just an epistemically idle step in the cognitive process that terminates in my knowledge of the tiger. It's natural to think that it makes some epistemic difference—whether it's because it plays an essential role in generating my knowledge, or merely makes my knowledge more likely, or increases justification, or whatever. One way or another—however it is cashed out—it seems like my experience has some epistemic oomph.⁴

Now, to be clear, the claim here isn't that experience is the only possible route to my knowing about a tiger at the zoo. I could've known about it in other ways—a zoo keeper could've told me about it, for example. So the claim here is rather that, in some actual cases of knowledge that seem to come from experience, experience plays some positive epistemic role in generating that knowledge. So just focus on the case where, as a matter of fact, I come to know about the tiger by seeing it. The

³ Here and throughout this paper I am focusing on perceptual knowledge of the external world (versus, say, self-knowledge), and I am assuming the falsity of external world skepticism. The debate over the epistemic significance/oomph of experience isn't a debate over skepticism—over whether we have knowledge of the external world. It presupposes that we have such knowledge and is rather over whether (or how) experience plays a positive epistemic role in generating it.

⁴ It would be nice to have a general, agreed-upon precisification of the claim that experience has epistemic oomph. But how this claim is precisified will very much depend on what role one ends up thinking experience plays in generating knowledge. For example, on my view, which is that experience is a kind of knowledge, the following claim is true: For some actual knowledge *k* had by some subject *s*, there is some experience *e* had by *s* such that, necessarily, if *s* had not had *e*, *s* would not have had *k*. That's a strong claim—it makes experience *absolutely necessary* for some knowledge. But I don't think one would need to defend such a strong claim in order to establish that experience plays some positive epistemic role in generating knowledge (cf. Byrne, 2016, p. 951).

claim is that in *that* case, *that* visual experience played a positive epistemic role in generating *that* bit of knowledge.

But what is that role? One initial thought might be that it's a *causal* role—that experience helps generate knowledge by causing it. Indeed, the standard picture of how I come to know (via perception) about the tiger in front of me is that information from the world impacts my sensory receptors, which then send signals to my brain that then cause me to have an experience of the tiger (or “as of” the tiger), which in turn causes me to form beliefs about the tiger, which then, in the right conditions, amount to knowledge. So here are the steps: (i) information from the world, (ii) sensory processing, (iii) experience, (iv) beliefs that add up to knowledge (cf., Byrne, 2016). And, on this picture, experience is one step in the epistemic causal process. So one potential suggestion is that experience has epistemic oomph because it *causes* some knowledge.

But there has to be more to it than that if the claim that experience has epistemic oomph is to be vindicated. Sure, experience often plays a causal role in generating knowledge. But the claim here is that it plays a positive *epistemic* role in generating knowledge (hence, “epistemic oomph”). And a merely causal story isn't enough to vindicate that claim. To get a better sense of why, consider an analogy from Alex Byrne (2016):

Suppose you want to get a message to Bertie. You can tell him yourself, or you can tell Alys instead, and she will pass the message on. Assuming that telling Bertie yourself doesn't involve a long trip or other disadvantages, why bother with the messenger? In fact, telling Alys gratuitously *adds* possibilities of error—she might garble the message or fail to tell Bertie (p. 950).

This analogy illustrates how something could play a causal role in bringing about some result without it actually *helping*, in some other important sense, in bringing about that result. If you give Alys the message, she may play a causal role in Bertie's getting the message. But Alys wasn't needed. Nor did she really help the process—Bertie could've gotten, and was more likely to get, the message without her involvement.

With this analogy in mind, we can better appreciate some of the central questions regarding the epistemic oomph of experience. Even if experience plays a causal role in generating knowledge, as it may very well, we might still wonder whether it actually *helps*, epistemically, in generating that knowledge. We might wonder whether it is instead more like Alys—what Byrne (2016) calls a “superfluous middleman” (p. 951).

So we need more than a causal story. Another way to go—a path that goes beyond mere causation—is to say that experience sometimes plays a positive (even essential) role in *justifying* certain

of our beliefs. The thought is that my seeing the tiger in front of me not only *causes* me to form beliefs about the tiger, it also *justifies* those beliefs—or makes them rational, warranted, etc. On this approach, my experience isn't merely a causal middleman. It's doing epistemic work. So this may seem like a more promising route.⁵

The problem is that, as Byrne (2016) points out, it seems like, given all the other sensory and cognitive processing going on in my case, I could have justified beliefs—indeed, I could know—about the tiger without experiencing it. The worry isn't that I could learn about the tiger in some totally different way—by the zoo keeper telling me, for example. It's rather that the 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.

To get a better grip on the worry, again return to steps (i)-(iv) in the process of how I come to know about the tiger. The question is: What if we cut out the experience step? What if my sensory systems skipped it and went straight from (ii) to (iv), directly causing beliefs in me about my external environment? Would any epistemic damage be done? Or would this merely cut out a superfluous middleman? One might think that no epistemic damage would be done. For one might think that as long as the relevant information from the world is safely and reliably delivered to my mind, and as long as it is encoded in the relevant beliefs in all the right ways, the job is done—the justification is had, the knowledge is secured.

To reinforce the appeal of this thought, consider Ned Block's (1995) "superblindsight" case—a possible case in which someone is fully "access conscious" of external things but not phenomenally conscious of them:

Visual information from his blind field simply pops into his thoughts in the way that solutions to problems we've been worrying about pop into our thoughts, or in the way some people just know the time or which way is North without having any perceptual experience of it. The superblindsighter himself contrasts what it is like to know visually about an X in his blind field and an X in his sighted field. There is something it is like to experience the latter, but not the former, he says. It is the difference between just knowing and knowing via a visual experience (p. 233).

Block (1995) says that the superblindsighter would know about the external world by taking in information via his senses, even though he doesn't experience the external world. If Block is right,

⁵ Indeed, the majority of philosophers who have attempted to tackle this issue have taken this route in some form or other. They include Johnston (2006), Smithies (2014, 2019), Huemer (2001), Pryor (2000), Peacocke (2004), Pollock (1974), and many others. Again, see Byrne (2016), Johnston (2006), or Siegel and Silins (2015) for an overview.

then the sensory and cognitive processing involved in superblindsight is, all by itself—without any experience—sufficient to produce justified beliefs, and indeed knowledge, about the external world. Thus, if Block is right, then the superblindsighter needn't experience the world in order to have justified perceptual beliefs about it.

But now if experience isn't needed for justification in the superblindsighter case, it's natural to also suppose, and think, that it isn't needed in normal cases. For it's natural to think that our sensory and cognitive systems could glean the relevant information from the world and directly encode that information in beliefs about the world without producing any experiences of the world. And it's natural to think that these beliefs would be justified and, indeed, that we could (and would) know about the world in this way.

In fact, this conclusion is inevitable on certain theories of justification. Take reliabilism. On this view, so long as one's beliefs are produced by a reliable cognitive faculty—i.e., one that produces mostly true beliefs—they are justified.⁶ The superblindsighter's perceptual beliefs are, by stipulation, reliably formed. So, if reliabilism is true, they are justified. And as long as our sensory and cognitive faculties could likewise reliably form true beliefs without producing experiences—using just non-experiential information processing—those beliefs would be justified on reliabilism. Thus, if this is possible, and if reliabilism is true, then it looks like experience is just a superfluous middleman when it comes to our perceptual knowledge.

This conclusion may also be inevitable on other theories of justification. But you may not need to consult any specific theory of justification in order to see the force of the point. For you may think it's just intuitively plausible that one could have these justified perceptual beliefs sans experience. But then, if that's right, then the epistemic significance of experience—its epistemic oomph—can't be explained by saying that experience plays a positive (even essential) role in justifying the relevant beliefs. For, if everything I just said is right, that justification could be gotten without the experience. My experience of the tiger at the zoo would be like Alys—yes, as a matter of fact, it was part of the story of how I came to know about the tiger, but it wasn't *needed* for me to know about the tiger, and it didn't even really help, epistemically. Just like the message delivered to Bertie, my knowledge could have been conveyed to me in a more direct way.

⁶ There are various different version of, and tweaks on, reliabilism. And reliabilism (broadly construed) has a ton of defenders, including Goldman (1997), Plantinga (1993), Comesana (2002), Lyons (2009), Dretske (1981), and Pritchard (2016). See Goldman and Beddor (2016) for an overview.

At least that's one potential reaction. On the other hand, you could always deny some or all of what I just said. That is, you could deny that we (including the superblindsighter) could have justified perceptual beliefs sans experience. Declan Smithies (2014, 2019), for example, argues that experience is the basis of all justification—that phenomenally individuated mental states determine which of our beliefs are justified. So his view implies that the superblindsighter's beliefs about the external world are unjustified. And, more generally, it implies that our perceptual beliefs about the external world couldn't be justified sans experience in the way described above. So the present strategy for explaining the epistemic oomph of experience—i.e., by saying it plays a positive role in justifying beliefs—is still available to Smithies. He has an out.

However, I want to foreclose this out for now. For one thing, this exit strategy relies on a minority view among theories of justification—one that isn't going to appeal to very many. Also, I want to take seriously the challenge—raised by Byrne (2016) and others—about the epistemic oomph of experience. So I want to grant the intuition that our perceptual beliefs could be justified without our having the relevant experiences. And then what I want to show is that, *even if* this is the case, and so *even if* one rejects something like Smithies' experientialist account of justification, experience still has epistemic oomph. Thus, I am willing to grant that the explanation for the epistemic oomph of experience doesn't lie at what Byrne (2016) calls “the experience-belief synapse”—i.e., the link or transition from experience to belief—because that synapse could be severed without thereby excising the relevant knowledge.

But, with that much granted, I also want to close the door on Byrne's (2016) way out of the problem. Byrne suggests that perceptual experiences are partly constituted by beliefs—that believing P just is part of experiencing P. So he suggests that experiences have epistemic oomph because, in the good cases where those beliefs add up to knowledge, experiences are partly constituted by knowledge. I think Byrne's view has some virtues. In particular, I think Byrne is wise to dodge the troublesome experience-belief synapse. But I also think his view has some vices. First, I think it's implausible, for reasons that we needn't get into here, that experiences are partly constituted by beliefs. Sure, experiences may typically—even always—*come along* with beliefs. But they're distinct mental states. Or so I say. Second, it's not clear that Byrne's view actually vindicates the idea that experience has epistemic oomph, at least not in the way that idea was originally formulated. The datum we started with was that phenomenal experience *itself*—the looks, the feels, the sounds, etc.—has epistemic oomph. But, on Byrne's view, it doesn't really—it's only the belief component, not the phenomenal

component, which carries epistemic weight. So I'm doubtful that Byrne's out really is an out. From where I stand, it looks more like a door locked from the inside.⁷

But set those complaints aside. For my goal here isn't to dwell on criticisms of Byrne's out, or Smithies' out, or anyone else's out. It's to press the problem and then offer my own out. The mere fact that philosophers haven't scampered en masse for either of the above exits is sufficient evidence that there is an appetite for another avenue. So opening up another viable path to explaining the epistemic oomph of experience will be valuable irrespective of where others' views end up. And so it's to that task that I now turn.

2. Experience is Knowledge

My explanation for the epistemic oomph of experience is very simple. I say that experience is, all by itself, a kind of knowledge. So experience helps generate knowledge by *being it*. That's how it has epistemic oomph.

To get an initial grip on what this explanation is all about, go back to the case where I see a tiger at the zoo. The standard view is, again, that I take in information, process it, have an experience, and then form beliefs about the tiger that, given the right conditions, amount to knowledge. I say forget the beliefs for a second. The visual experience *itself* is a kind of knowledge—what Russell (1912) calls “knowledge of things” (more on this below). So, given the right conditions, just *seeing* the tiger—visually experiencing it—is enough to know of it. I of course don't deny that we also form perceptual beliefs about the external world that amount to knowledge. I just deny that those beliefs are required for perceptual knowledge. For, again, I say that experience *itself* is a kind of knowledge. In this way, experience has epistemic oomph.⁸

On this view, experience has a very significant epistemic role. It doesn't just cause or justify knowledge; it doesn't just contribute to it or make it more likely. On this view, experience *is* knowledge.

⁷ Another common objection to Byrne's solution—one which he addresses—comes from cases of known illusion, where something appears some illusory way to a subject, but she knows that it is an illusion. In such cases, it seems that one experiences P but doesn't believe P. In which case believing P couldn't be a constitutive part of experiencing P, as per Byrne's view. Byrne (2016) responds by saying that, in such cases, one does believe P, but one's belief is held in check by a stronger belief. I'll leave it to readers to assess the merits of Byrne's response.

⁸ In this paper, I have been and will continue to focus on *perceptual* experiences, since those are the core cases that motivate our problem. However, it's worth mentioning that my view naturally extends to other kinds of experiences too. Take, for example, the sharp knee pain that I feel. Just as I can know of the tiger in front of me simply by seeing it, so too I can know of my knee pain simply by feeling it. And, on my view, the experience *is* knowledge—both of the pain itself and, plausibly, of the physical disturbance in my knee that is its cause or basis. More on this below.

So it is strictly *essential* for some knowledge—that is, for some knowledge had by some subjects, there are experiences such that, necessarily, if those subjects had not had those experiences, they would not have had that knowledge.

Which, again, isn't to say that experience is the only possible route to knowledge of, say, a tiger at a zoo. There are other routes. It's just that, in this case, a particular visual experience is essential to a particular bit of knowledge. The original problem of the epistemic oomph of experience arose when we considered some perceptual belief that amounted to knowledge, and we noted that *that very belief* could've amounted to knowledge without the experience. Nothing like that is true for experiential knowledge. If some knowledge *just is* an experience, then it is false—trivially so—that *that very knowledge* could've existed without the experience. After all, that knowledge *is* the experience, and you can't have an experience without an experience.

This solution to the problem is similar to Byrne's (2016) solution in that it doesn't locate the epistemic oomph of experience in the experience-belief synapse—that is, in experience's *relation* to beliefs that are distinct from it. In particular, it doesn't say that experience has epistemic oomph only because it causes or justifies (distinct) beliefs. So my solution, like Byrne's, is immune to the aforementioned worries with such accounts of experience's epistemic oomph. So my solution shares this virtue with Byrne's solution.

It also lacks the vices. First, it doesn't require commitment to the implausible view that experiences are partly constituted by beliefs. Second, whereas on Byrne's view the phenomenal aspect of experience is epistemically idle—it's only the belief component of experience that has any epistemic oomph—on my view the phenomenal component (which I maintain is the only component of an experience) is epistemically significant. The looks, the feels, the sounds, the tastes—on my view, they *themselves* have epistemic oomph. Thus, unlike Byrne's solution, my solution locates the epistemic significance of experience in experience *itself*. And thus, unlike Byrne's solution, my solution truly vindicates our original datum.

So, already, my solution has a lot going for it—it has virtues that many solutions lack, but without the trade-off vices.

However, more needs to be said to vindicate my explanation of experience's epistemic oomph. For one thing, there are a bunch of potential objections to it. I'll address those in the next section. But also, in order for my knowledge of things explanation to get off the ground, I need to say more about what this experiential knowledge that I'm talking about is supposed to be. I've laid out and defended

a detailed account of it elsewhere (Duncan, forthcoming).⁹ So, in the remainder of this section, I'll limit myself to some pertinent highlights.

Let's start with Russell. He maintains that there are two kinds of knowledge: knowledge of *truths* and knowledge of *things*. Russell (1912) says 'knowledge' in the former sense is:

... the sense in which what we know is *true*, the sense which applies to our beliefs and convictions, i.e. to what are called *judgments*. In this sense of the word we know *that* something is the case (p. 69).

For Russell, knowledge of truths is ordinary propositional knowledge—constituted by beliefs in propositions. And it is distinct from knowledge of *things*, which comes in two varieties: knowledge by *acquaintance* and knowledge by *description*. Russell (1911) describes acquaintance as follows:

I say that I am *acquainted* with an object when I have a direct cognitive relation to that object, i.e. when I am directly aware of the object itself (p. 108).

Russell (1911) then describes acquaintance as the direct “presentation” of objects and properties to one's senses (p. 108), and says that, strictly speaking, we are only ever acquainted with sense data, our awareness of sense data, and a few other things. All other knowledge of things is indirect, according to Russell, and counts as knowledge by *description*—it's the kind of knowledge we have when we know of something as satisfying some description or falling under some concept, such as “the tiger at the zoo”, “the zookeeper”, or “*that* thing there”.

According to Russell (1912, p. 73), knowledge by description presupposes some knowledge of truths. For example, in order to know a tiger as “that tiger”, I must know certain propositions about what tigers are. Nonetheless, Russell holds that knowledge by description is distinct from knowledge of truths. My knowledge of the tiger, its color, shape, etc., is not the same as, nor is it reducible to, knowledge of propositions.

⁹ Aside from this account, knowledge of things has been largely ignored by contemporary analytic philosophers. A few other philosophers, such as Earl Conee (1994), Colin McGinn (2008), and Michael Tye (2009), do endorse knowledge of things (in the service of other ends), but they don't developed their accounts in much detail, so they leave themselves open to some fairly straightforward objections (see Crane, 2012). There are a couple of other philosophers who defend something that is at least similar to knowledge of things. For example, Eleanor Stump (2010) and Lorraine Keller (2018) talk about “Franciscan knowledge”, which is very much like knowledge of things. M. Oreste Fiocco (2017) defends a Brentano-inspired account of something like knowledge of things. Matthew Benton (2017) talks about interpersonal knowledge, which is non-propositional and may be a species of knowledge of things. And Frank Hofmann (2014) argues that perceptual experience is “non-conceptual knowledge,” which is non-doxastic (though propositional). It may be that there are other philosophers out there who just haven't thought about this issue, or for whatever other reason are not *opposed* to knowledge of things (maybe they even like the idea). But it's safe to say that knowledge of things has been largely ignored by contemporary analytic philosophers.

Furthermore, on this account, not all knowledge of things presupposes or requires knowledge of truths. Take my knowledge of the color of the tiger. I know of it *as orange*. This knowledge requires that I possess the concept *orange*, and thus it presupposes some background knowledge of truths about what orange is. But I also know of the *very specific* shade of orange that I see when I look at the tiger, for which I have no concept. This knowledge of things does not require knowledge of truths. Or consider another example. Right now I'm looking at a set of bookcases in my office. They are full of books. I see these books of various specific shapes, sizes, and colors, at various angles and in various relations to each other. What I see is highly determinate and fine-grained. I really do see those books in all their complex and multifarious glory. And, on this account, I know of them.¹⁰ To be more specific, suppose that, in some precise region in the center of my visual field, there are 48 books. I see, and thus know of, those 48 books. But of course I don't know *that* there are 48 books there. Furthermore, I don't know *that* the bright red book is 17 books to the left of that dull grey, tattered book. Or anything of the sort. In this way, as in others, my knowledge of highly determinate, fine-grained properties and objects in my environment outstrips what I know about them propositionally.¹¹ And this knowledge of things does not presuppose or require propositional knowledge/knowledge of truths.

Russell (1911, 1912) goes on to say more about knowledge of things. But he never fully develops his characterization of it. Also, some of the particulars of his view (e.g., sense data) are unpopular with contemporary philosophers. So what I'll do now is offer what I think is a plausible adaptation of Russell's view.

I take knowledge of things to be constituted by awareness (or consciousness) of properties and objects. In the present context, I am specifically interested in *experiential* awareness. So I will focus on knowledge of things as constituted by experiences of properties and objects.¹² Some paradigm cases are perceptual experiences. When I see the tiger in front of me, I know of it. When I see the 48

¹⁰ Russell (1911, 1912) would say that what I know of most immediately in this case are *sense data* that make up the appearances of the books. So he would describe this case a little differently (though not in a way that matters for the point that I am making here). However, most philosophers these days reject the sense-datum view. So I will set this part of Russell's view aside.

¹¹ This naturally raises the question: Do I know of *everything* that I experience (in good conditions), or must I *attend to* a thing, or notice it in some other way, in order to know of it? For what it's worth, I'm inclined to say that we don't know of everything that we experience—that some level of attention is required to justify knowledge of things (see below). But I also think that acquiring knowledge of things doesn't generally require great mental effort. We regularly know of all sorts of things that we don't carefully attend to. I may know of a tiger in front of me, for example, without carefully attending to it. So although knowledge of things does require *some* attention, it doesn't require a great deal of it.

¹² In what follows I will talk about experience in a way that is most fitting for a representationalist (or intentionalist) view of experience, which is the most popular view of perceptual experience these days. However, the main elements of my account can be reformulated so as to suit other views, such as naïve realism or the sense-datum theory.

books in my office, I know of them (even though I do not know *that* there are 48 books there). The same goes for other sense modalities. I can experience, and thus know of, properties and objects in my environment by smelling, hearing, tasting, or touching them. I can also know of the position of my body via proprioception.

Other paradigm cases of knowledge of things include *self-knowledge*—i.e., knowledge of one’s own mental states—that comes via introspection. By introspecting, I can know of my knee pain, this annoying nose tickle, my anger at how bad New England drivers are, and my thoughts about Russell, knowledge, and tigers.¹³

Further details about knowledge of things can be seen most starkly when it is contrasted with propositional knowledge (or knowledge of truths). Propositional knowledge is constituted by a subject’s bearing a certain relation—namely, the *belief* relation—to a proposition. Knowledge of things differs in both relation and content. When a subject knows of things, she *experiences* something—she is *experientially aware* (or *conscious*) of it.¹⁴ And the contents of her knowledge are properties and objects—colors, shapes, tigers, people, etc.—not propositions.¹⁵ Hence, knowledge of truths and of things differ both in their relation and content.

Now, in any given case, there is more to knowledge than one’s bearing a relation to a content—further conditions must also be satisfied. For example, one cannot know a proposition that is false—to know that P, P must be *true*. Also, to know that P, one’s belief must be *justified*. These are necessary

¹³ What other kinds of experiences are potential knowledge? What about experiences of boredom, for example? Or nausea? Although taking a stand on this issue isn’t necessary to support my claim that *some* experiences are knowledge, my own view is that even the above kinds of experiences are potential knowledge. What are they knowledge of? Of *oneself*, I think—of one’s own mind and/or bodily state. Of one’s boredom or nausea. There are plenty of further questions about how to explain or describe this self-knowledge (e.g., Is this knowledge quasi-perceptual? Is attention required for it? If so, what is one attending to when one comes to know of it?), just as there are plenty of further questions about the nature and structure of perceptual experience. But I will not attempt to settle or even pick sides on these issues here. However it is spelled out, the point is that in experience we come to know of various objects and properties—in both our environment and ourselves—and, on my view, these experiences can and sometimes do constitute knowledge of those objects and properties. Thanks to Uriah Kriegel for raising this point.

¹⁴ For reasons that I won’t go into here, I think that this relation is primitive—it admits of no informative (i.e., non-circular) definition or analysis. But this point isn’t essential to my account of knowledge of things. Those who prefer a reductive account of the consciousness relation may take a different tack. For example, some say that the aware/conscious of relation is reducible to a *tracking* relation, where consciousness of property/object x is reducible to one’s being in a state that is poised for cognitive access and that causally-covaries with the instantiation of x (see, e.g., Dretske, 1995; Tye, 1995). So although I think this relation is primitive, reductionists still have room on board.

¹⁵ Maybe you think that the contents of perception are (or include) propositions. If that’s your view, then you could accept a version of this knowledge of things solution on which experience is a kind of propositional knowledge. But I prefer a non-propositional version of knowledge of things (see Duncan, forthcoming). So if you think that perception has propositional content, just note that what I’m talking about as the contents of knowledge of things are the individual objects and properties that I experience—what may be the *constituent parts* of perceptual propositions. So, even if you think that perception is propositional, there’s still room for knowledge of things in my sense.

conditions on knowledge of truths. And I take knowledge of things to be partly similar, partly different along each of these dimensions.

Start with truth. Experiences are not true or false. My experience of the color of the tiger, for example, is neither true nor false. But experiences are *veridical* or *non-veridical*. One's experience of property Q is veridical if and only if Q is instantiated as it's represented; one's experience of an object O is veridical if and only if O exists and is present as represented. And it's natural to think that, in order to count as knowledge (of things) of property Q or object O, one's experience of Q or O must be veridical.

It's also natural to think that, in order to count as knowledge, an experience must have a rational/normative status parallel to that of justification for beliefs. The idea would be that, in normal cases, my experiences are in some sense rational or justified as representations of things around me. But if instead I am in non-ideal circumstances—in poor lighting or a hall of mirrors, for example—my experiences of things around me may be less justified or rational, even if they happen to be veridical. Perhaps more controversially, if my experiences are being influenced in an epistemically untoward way—by unjustified background beliefs, for example—then those experiences may be less rational than they otherwise would be (Siegel, 2017).

There are various ways to spell this idea out. For example, it could be spelled out in terms of Susanna Siegel's (2017) "epistemic charge"¹⁶; or in terms of epistemic *luck* or *risk* (Pritchard, 2016)¹⁷; or in terms of epistemic *virtues* related to experience, such as attentiveness, acuity, and perceptual memory; or in terms of the *reliability* of our faculties for producing veridical experiences. There are other options too, as you can imagine. All of this is ripe for controversy and is bound to remain so, if for no other reason than that every account of epistemic normativity is controversial. But the point

¹⁶ According to Siegel (2017), epistemic charge is an epistemic property that gives experiences rational standing. More carefully, it is, "A property of experience that can be modulated by psychological precursors of the experience and transmitted to subsequent beliefs, and in virtue of which a subject's experience manifests an epistemic status" (p. 41). Siegel uses the term 'charge' to draw an analogy with electricity—just as electric charge can be passed from one thing to another, so too epistemic charge can be passed from psychological precursors to experiences and then to beliefs.

¹⁷ On Pritchard's (2016) account, a belief is epistemically lucky just in case it is actually true but there are nearby possible worlds—worlds much like the actual world—in which it is false. Pritchard's account of epistemic risk is very similar—it is a matter of whether an actually true belief is false in a nearby possible world. The differences are (or at least include) that risk is forward-looking (rather than backward-looking, as with luck), concerns only negative states or events, and, according to Pritchard, really is the kind of thing we want to avoid, epistemically. Either of these notions could be applied to experiences by talking about whether a given experience (as opposed to a belief) that is actually veridical (as opposed to true) is non-veridical in nearby possible worlds.

here is just that it's natural to expect knowledge of things to have a normative status parallel to that of knowledge of truths.¹⁸ Further work is needed to elucidate this parallel.

So that's knowledge of things. I said what constitutes it (experiences of properties and objects), gave paradigm examples of it (from perception), and compared and contrasted it with knowledge of truths. In giving this adaptation of Russell's account, I don't mean to imply that all philosophers who posit knowledge of things are, or should be, committed to every aspect of this account. I offer this account merely to show how the basics of Russell's view might be filled out. It's not the aim of this paper to show that some *specific* view about knowledge of things is right; rather, it's to develop a solution to a particular problem. So if, at the end of the day, aspects of the above account need to be adjusted or rejected, so be it. The core of the view is just that some knowledge is constituted by experiences of properties and objects.

And, as we've seen, this view provides a simple, elegant solution to our problem concerning the epistemic oomph of experience. If some knowledge is constituted by experiences of properties and objects, then experience has epistemic oomph simply because it is a kind of knowledge. This gives experience a very significant epistemic role. For, on this view, some experiences are strictly essential for some knowledge. And, as we've seen, this solution shares the virtues, but not the vices, of some of its main competitors.

3. Objections

So that's my answer as to how experience has epistemic oomph. Now I'll address some potential objections.

Objection 1: I (the objector) am not convinced that knowledge of things exists. Is there more to be said in its favor?

Response: Yes! Elsewhere I have given several arguments for thinking that knowledge of things exists (see Duncan, forthcoming). In one argument, I appeal to certain cases of fine-grained perceptual

¹⁸ Maybe you are skeptical that experiences could have such a status. Perhaps this is because you think that, unlike beliefs, experiences are formed *passively*—we just “take in” what's around us—and because, unlike beliefs, what we experience is not entirely up to us or rationally adjustable. But there are several false assumptions here. As Siegel (2017) points out, many of our beliefs are also formed passively (e.g., my belief that I'm now typing), and some of our beliefs are not under our control or rationally adjustable (e.g., delusions). What's more, how we experience the world *is* rationally adjustable and, in many respects, under our control. We can choose what to look at or attend to, adjust background assumptions that affect how we experience things, disavow experiences (e.g., illusions), and shape our perceptual experiences through learning and habituation, for example (Siegel, 2017, §3.1). Thus, beliefs and experiences are more similar than you might've thought in terms of their fitness for justification.

knowledge—cases where it seems obvious that we have knowledge about certain properties or objects around us and where positing such knowledge is needed to explain our behavior—and I argue that we lack some of the beliefs that we'd have to have in order for this knowledge to be purely propositional. I also argue that experiences bear various hallmarks of knowledge—that is, that they play various philosophical roles that are distinctive of knowledge. For example, I argue that, in experience, we grasp reality and gain evidence in a distinctively epistemic way; that experiences render us appropriate subjects of epistemic praise and blame and serve as the knowledge base for various forms of expertise; and that experiences are sometimes the bases of knowledge-conferring inferences in ways that imply that they themselves are knowledge. So knowledge of things has a lot going for it.

And this paper offers yet further support for knowledge of things. For allowing that some knowledge is of things solves an important, seemingly intractable problem about the epistemic oomph of experience. We started with a datum: Experience has epistemic oomph. Positing knowledge of things explains that datum. Which is evidence that knowledge of things exists. And the fact that this datum is not easily explained otherwise, and that other views struggle to explain it, and that leading candidate explanations require commitment to views that many reject, adds to the evidence for knowledge of things.

Again, there are other reasons to accept that knowledge of things exists. But this paper offers its own backup.

Objection 2: Here's a more specific worry about knowledge of things: It is supposedly constituted, not by beliefs in propositions, but by experiences of properties and objects. But properties and objects can't be true (or false). How could one know something that isn't true? Also, beliefs, not experiences, are the kinds of mental states that can be justified (or unjustified). How could one have knowledge that isn't justified?

Response: It's true that properties and objects can't be true or false. But representations of them can be veridical or non-veridical (or accurate or inaccurate), which is parallel to truth and falsity. Also, as I suggested above, it's natural to think that knowledge of things has a normative status parallel to that of justification for beliefs. These may not be exactly the same as truth/falsity and (doxastic) justification. But knowledge of things is a different kind of knowledge. So we shouldn't expect it to be exactly the same as propositional knowledge. On the other hand, the fact that there are parallels with respect to truth/falsity and justification for knowledge of things should bolster our confidence that it is a denizen of the epistemic realm.

Objection 3: Fine, but if there is knowledge of things, shouldn't there be an ordinary language analogue to propositional knowledge? Is there any evidence in ordinary language for the existence of knowledge of things?

Response: There is. Matthew Benton (2017) makes a case based entirely on ordinary language considerations for thinking that something like knowledge of things exists. He starts by pointing out that, in English, there is a difference between phrases like 'S knows that ϕ ' and 'S knows NP' where 'NP' is a noun phrase (p. 2). He then argues that the way 'know' is used in these cases fails various tests for semantic sameness. This suggests that, in English, the propositional sense of 'know' ('know that P') is used differently, and indeed, does not mean the same thing as, the non-propositional sense of 'know' ('know Q' or 'know of Q').

Benton (2017) also points out that many languages have a distinct sense of 'know' that refers to non-propositional knowledge (see also Tye, 2009; McGinn, 2008). In Spanish it's 'conocer' (as opposed to 'saber' for propositional knowledge), in German it's 'kennen' (vs. 'wissen'), in French it's 'connaître' (vs. 'savoir'), in Hebrew it's 'lehakir' (vs. 'lada'at'), and in Chinese it's 'renshi' (vs. 'zhidao'). So various languages use distinct terms to distinguish between propositional and non-propositional knowledge. And Benton appeals to this fact, along with other ordinary language considerations, to argue that some knowledge is non-propositional.

Objection 4: These ordinary language considerations are inconclusive. It's not obvious that the uses of 'know' mentioned above refer specifically to knowledge of things. Speakers might mean something else. Plus, these knowledge attributions can always be paraphrased into attributions of propositional knowledge.

Response: I agree that the ordinary language case for knowledge of things isn't totally conclusive. More generally, I think that language, including language involving knowledge attributions, is messy and an imperfect guide to reality. However, those who do favor ordinary language considerations in this context may find Benton's arguments persuasive, or at least some evidence in favor of knowledge of things. And, at very least, it's worth pointing out that there is no ordinary language case *against* there being knowledge of things.

With that said, I do find other arguments for knowledge of things more compelling—such as those mentioned above. That experience plays various distinctively epistemic roles—and thus bears those hallmarks of knowledge—is, I think, a good reason to accept that knowledge of things exists. So even if ordinary language can't settle the matter—and I concede that it can't—there's ample reason to accept knowledge of things.

Objection 5: All putative knowledge of things can be modeled or represented in a proposition-friendly way. For example, it's possible to represent experiential states algebraically, or with a probability distribution, or in some other formal way. Then this knowledge can be modeled in line with the propositional orthodoxy.

Reply: I deny that all experiential knowledge can be fully captured propositionally. I maintain that a propositional modeling is bound to leave something out in terms of what we know (see Duncan, forthcoming). So I reject the guiding assumption of this objection that our knowledge can be fully represented propositionally.

But set that aside. For the real question in this context is not whether knowledge of things can be *represented* propositionally; it's just whether knowledge of things *exists*. For if knowledge of things exists, then some experiences are knowledge, and so they have epistemic oomph. And, indeed, we have reason to think that this knowledge does exist. So we have reason to think that some experiences are knowledge and thus have epistemic oomph. This is consistent with the possibility that this knowledge can be represented propositionally. Indeed, several of the arguments given or alluded to above are neutral on whether perceptual knowledge can be represented or modeled propositionally—that is, they are consistent with the possibility of such a modeling. Yet they still support the conclusion that there is knowledge of things—that some experiences constitute knowledge. So even if all experiential knowledge *could* be fully represented propositionally, still, there would be plenty of reason to believe that some knowledge is of things.

An analogy may help. Suppose we're looking at a painting and you tell me that you could, in principle, give me some detailed description of all its features. Does that mean that this painting is a story, not a picture? Hardly. The fact that a representation of one type can be modelled using a representation of another type doesn't mean the former is in fact the latter. So that knowledge of things might be modeled propositionally shouldn't shake our confidence that it exists, especially given all of the reasons to accept it.¹⁹

Objection 6: Even if there are reasons to accept that knowledge of things exists, this thesis is still controversial. We set aside Smithies' solution in part because his is a minority view and all kinds of controversial. Knowledge of things must be at least as controversial. If so, shouldn't we set that solution aside too?

¹⁹ Or consider another analogy. You might think that various moral theories can be “consequentialized”—modeled or described in an extensionally equivalent, consequentialist-friendly way. And yet that, by itself, hardly implies that every moral theory is in fact consequentialist. Thanks to Chris Ranalli for this suggestion.

Response: It's an interesting question whether knowledge of things is controversial. Certainly a lot of philosophers *ignore* it. But if you look at encyclopedia entries or introductory textbooks on epistemology, you'll find a lot of philosophers asserting (as if it's obvious) that knowledge of things exists (see, e.g., Feldman, 2002, p. 12; Martin, 2010, p. 1-2; Fumerton, 2006; p. 1; Audi, 2011; Ch. 1; Fantl, 2017; Steup, 2017; Ichikawa and Steup, 2017). So it's not clear to me that knowledge of things actually is very controversial.

And even if it is controversial, it's not controversial in the way that Smithies' view is. Smithies' view is incompatible with most philosophers' views in this debate.²⁰ Knowledge of things isn't.²¹ That is, whether or not others in this debate accept knowledge of things, it's open to them in a way that Smithies' views may not be.

Furthermore, in setting aside Smithies' view, I don't mean to suggest that it's not a live option. It's just not *my* option. My aim in this paper isn't so much to criticize other solutions to the problem; it's rather to offer another solution that may be appealing to those who don't like the other going solutions. Given what I've argued, we don't need to pin our hopes on Smithies' solution. Even if his view and others' views are wrong, still, we can accept that experience has epistemic oomph. And the fact that philosophers haven't rallied around any of the other solutions suggests that there is indeed appetite for another option.

Objection 7: Okay, let's suppose that knowledge of things exists. Still, this doesn't solve our problem. For it's still possible to have perceptual knowledge without knowledge of things—without having the experience. And it's not just that some possible perceptual knowledge could be had without the experience; it's that for *every* case of perceptual knowledge there is a parallel case of knowledge without experience. Remember the steps: (i) information from the world, (ii) sensory processing, (iii) experience, (iv) beliefs that add up to knowledge. Even if some experiences are knowledge, it's still possible to go right from (ii) to (iv). So it's possible to know everything we know without experience. So experience is superfluous.

Response: Again, I deny that it's possible to know everything we know sans experience. But even if I'm wrong about that, the key point in this context isn't that experiencing X is the *only* way to

²⁰ This includes, of course, Byrne (2016). But it also includes anyone who denies that justification wholly depends on phenomenally individuated states. Which is a ton of people—indeed, the vast majority of philosophers.

²¹ This includes views about justification (as I mentioned in the previous section) and also a wide array of views in epistemology more generally—e.g., internalism, externalism, foundationalism, coherentism, knowledge-first epistemology, conceptualism, non-conceptualism, etc. That's partly because most of the views formulated in contemporary epistemology are only about *propositional* knowledge.

know about X. That's not what's at issue. What's at issue is whether experience is *one way* to know about X where the experience is doing epistemic work (cf. Byrne, 2016, p. 491). If some experiences are knowledge, then, in those cases, experience is doing epistemic work, regardless of whether there are other ways to get the job done.

Objection 8: The superblindsighter is still *aware* of things, just not *experientially* or *consciously* aware of them. So couldn't he still have a kind of knowledge of things. If so, then even knowledge of things can be had without any experience. Which once again just raises the question of what epistemic role the experience is playing.

Response: One potential response is to deny that non-experiential awareness could ever amount to knowledge of things. But bracket that. Let's grant that some possible knowledge of things is non-experiential. This doesn't detract from the claim that some experiential awareness is also knowledge. Indeed, it doesn't detract from the claim that a lot of ordinary cases of experiential awareness are knowledge. So it doesn't detract from the claim that experiential awareness is essential for knowledge in a lot of ordinary cases. Which is sufficient to show that experience has epistemic oomph. For, again, if some knowledge *just is* an experience, then experience plays a positive epistemic role in generating that knowledge—namely, by being it.

Objection 9: Even if the knowledge of things solution is right and experience is essential to some knowledge in virtue of being that knowledge, that doesn't explain how experience has epistemic oomph when it comes to generating *propositional* perceptual knowledge—e.g., my knowledge *that* there is a tiger at the zoo. Which was one of the original cases in need of explanation. So this solution doesn't address the original problem.

Response: The original problem was just about explaining the epistemic oomph of experience. My example was merely meant to illustrate that problem—a problem which, in the last several decades, philosophers have addressed with only propositional knowledge on their radars. Hence the example. But the fact that knowledge of things doesn't, by itself, explain how experience has epistemic oomph for propositional perceptual knowledge (if it does have that kind of oomph) doesn't imply that it doesn't explain how experience has epistemic oomph more generally. It *does* explain that. Which is the heart of the original problem.

Think of it this way. Suppose someone is pondering over the original problem and says, "It seems obvious that experience has epistemic oomph, but I just can't see how." Then suppose she reads this paper and agrees that experience has epistemic oomph when it comes to generating knowledge of things. It would be unfair of her to nonetheless maintain that I haven't addressed her

original pondering just because I haven't shown that experience has epistemic oomph for *every* kind of knowledge—because I only showed that it has this oomph for some kinds of knowledge. Epistemic oomph is epistemic oomph.

With that said, appealing to knowledge of things may also help explain how experience is epistemically relevant to propositional perceptual knowledge. It may do this by figuring in an account of how knowledge of things gives rise to or supports propositional knowledge. It is beyond the scope of this paper to give such an account (see Duncan, forthcoming, for more). But the point here is just that knowledge of things may go even above and beyond the call of duty when it comes to explaining the epistemic oomph of experience.

Objection 10: There are all sorts of other issues that this solution doesn't address. For example, many of those who are concerned about the epistemic oomph of experience are thinking about issues having to do with skepticism, foundationalism, the Given, and so on. And it's not at all obvious how the knowledge of things solution addresses those issues. So, in the broader theoretical context, this solution falls short.

Response: Granted, I haven't said anything about these other issues. Which isn't to say that knowledge of things is irrelevant to them or that it can't help with other issues. But one thing at a time. And the purpose of this paper is just to lay out a simple, attractive explanation for the epistemic oomph of experience.

4. Conclusion

Other objections are no doubt waiting in the wings. Here I hope to have done just enough to get my candidate out there and maybe (hopefully) polling above zero. The datum was that experience has epistemic oomph. It just wasn't clear *how* it does. In this paper, I defended a solution to this problem. The solution is simple, straightforward, and, I think, worthy of further consideration. It's that experience is itself knowledge.

This of course applies to ordinary perceptual cases—e.g., where I see a tiger. But it also has broader import. To see this, consider: Not all experiences are ordinary. Some are life changing. Some shape what and how we think of ourselves, what we want to become, and how we interact with others. And the conclusion that experience is itself knowledge is highly relevant to the question of what might learn from—and *in*—these cases.

Consider one common but important case. Imagine that you're comforting a close friend who just lost a loved one. As you listen to her, and look at her, and carefully attend to her very subtle facial expressions and highly specific bodily manner, and as you interact with her in only a way that a close friend could, in those moments, there's so much that you see and know about her—about what she looks and sounds like; about what she's thinking and feeling and going through—that doesn't seem reducible to mere propositional information processing. Your experience *itself* packs an epistemic punch. And it matters that it does.

And so it's worth exploring how we can, and perhaps ought to, avail ourselves of these rich epistemic resources. We can start, I think, by recognizing that experience—the looks, the feels, the sounds—is itself knowledge.

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