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To cite this article: Matt Duncan (2016): Two Russellian Arguments for Acquaintance, Australasian Journal of Philosophy, DOI: [10.1080/00048402.2016.1255900](https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2016.1255900)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2016.1255900>



Published online: 29 Nov 2016.



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Two Russellian Arguments for Acquaintance

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ABSTRACT

Bertrand Russell [1912] argued that we are acquainted with our experiences. Although this conclusion has generated a lot of discussion, very little has been said about Russell's actual *arguments* for it. This paper aims to remedy that. I start by spelling out two Russellian arguments for acquaintance. Then I show that these arguments cannot both succeed. For if one is sound, the other isn't. Finally, I weigh our options with respect to these arguments, and defend one option in particular. I argue that we have good reason to believe that we can be, and sometimes are, acquainted with our experiences.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 12 April 2016; Revised 11 October 2016

KEYWORDS Self-knowledge; acquaintance; awareness; experience; Bertrand Russell

1. Introduction

In *The Problems of Philosophy* [1912], Bertrand Russell argued that each of us can be directly aware of—that is, *acquainted* with—our own experiences. Many philosophers accept Russell's conclusion.¹ Many others reject it.² Yet very little of this debate has centred on Russell's actual *arguments* for acquaintance. So, in what follows, I'll develop two arguments from Russell for the claim that we can be, and at least sometimes are, acquainted with our experiences. Then I'll show that if one of these arguments succeeds, the other doesn't. So, at most one is sound. Finally, I'll assess these arguments, and conclude with my own view of their merits. I have two goals: namely, to unearth two arguments for acquaintance, and to identify good reasons to believe that we can be, and sometimes are, acquainted with our experiences. Russell will be my starting point. However, this is not primarily a work of exegesis.³ It's an exploration of two arguments for acquaintance.

2. Acquaintance

Russell [73] introduces the notion of acquaintance as follows:⁴ 'We shall say that we have *acquaintance* with anything of which we are directly aware, without the

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¹ See, for example, Price [1932], Lewis [1946], Chisholm [1957], and, more recently, Fumerton [1995], BonJour [1999], Chalmers [2003], Feldman [2004], Balog [2012], and Gertler [2012].

² See, for example, Armstrong [1968], Harman [1990], Dretske [1994], Lycan [1996], and Tye [2000].

³ For exegesis of Russell's work on this topic, see, for example, Eames [1969], Baldwin [2003], Proops [2014], and Wishon and Linsky [2015].

⁴ All of my otherwise unattributed page references will be to Russell [1912].

intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths.’ According to Russell, one is acquainted with something if and only if one is *directly aware* of it. Consider an example. Suppose that I discover that it’s raining outside by looking at a weather report. I am aware of the rain, but only indirectly. For I am aware of the rain only in virtue of being aware of something else—the weather report. Now suppose that I go outside, see the rain, hear it pattering on the ground, and feel its droplets on my skin. Am I now directly aware of the rain? Not according to Russell. For, on his view, I am aware of the rain only in virtue of being aware of *appearances* of the rain. According to Russell, it’s these appearances with which I am acquainted. Now, he says that these appearances are entities called ‘sense-data’, and he holds that we are acquainted with both sense data and the mental events that constitute our awareness of those sense data. But most contemporary philosophers, including most acquaintance theorists, reject Russell’s metaphysics of experience. So, nowadays Russell’s main idea is typically stated as the claim that we can be, and sometimes are, acquainted with our *experiences*, whether those be events, properties, relations, or whatever.⁵ I will adopt this revision. So, with the rain example, the idea is that, although I am only indirectly aware of the rain, I am aware of my rain experiences directly: that is, I am aware of my experiences without anything mediating my awareness of them.

The notion of ‘directness’ in play here has both metaphysical and epistemic elements (cf. Gertler [2012]). There is a *metaphysical* element, in that the relation of awareness that I bear to an object of acquaintance is not mediated by any distinct entity or process. This differs from *indirect* relations such as the one that I bear to the rain when I look at a weather report. The rain causes someone to note that it’s raining, which causes there to be a weather report, which then causes me to be aware of the rain. This causal process involving various entities mediates my awareness of the rain. But if Russell is right, no such process mediates my awareness of my *experiences* of the rain.

There is an *epistemic* directness here as well. The idea is that if one is acquainted with some *x*, then one can form beliefs about *x*, the justification of which depends only on one’s awareness of *x*. So, if I am acquainted with my rain experiences, I can form justified beliefs about those experiences just by being aware of them. There is nothing else of which I must be aware in order to for those beliefs to be justified.⁶ In contrast, when I form a belief about the rain via my awareness of a weather report or my rain experiences, for example, the justification for my belief will depend, at least in part, on my awareness of something other than the rain—such as the weather report. Hence, I do not have direct epistemic access to the rain.

Further details about what it means to be acquainted with something are up for debate. For example, Russell [73] says that acquaintance is itself a kind of knowledge. But most contemporary acquaintance theorists disagree. They say that one must also conceptualize and think about objects of acquaintance in order to know anything of or about them (see, for example, Chalmers [2003] and Gertler [2011]). Such disagreements can be set aside for my purposes. The core feature of acquaintance is direct

⁵ For more detailed views about the metaphysics of the acquaintance theory, see Fumerton [1995], Chalmers [2003], Feldman [2004], and Gertler [2011, 2012].

⁶ This is arguably Russell’s view, and is standard among acquaintance theorists (e.g. Gertler [2011: ch. 4]). However, it’s worth pointing out that some acquaintance theorists (e.g. Fumerton [1995]) do tell a more complex story about justification on the basis of acquaintance.

awareness. And one is directly aware of something just in case one's awareness of (and thus justification for beliefs about) that thing is not mediated by any distinct entity or process.

3. Two Arguments for Acquaintance

As I've said, many philosophers believe that we can be acquainted with our experiences (see note 1). This belief is often taken as a premise in support of foundationalism, an acquaintance theory of self-knowledge, or a view about the nature of consciousness. The justification for this premise typically comes either from an appeal to introspection or from the explanatory pay-off of the theory in which it figures. But it would be nice if there was a direct argument for the claim that we can be acquainted with our experiences.

I believe that the kernels for two such arguments can be found in Russell [1912]. He is hardly explicit about these arguments. So, I won't insist that he would spell them out exactly as I will. Certainly Russell deserves careful exegesis. But my primary goals here are philosophical, not interpretational.

3.1 The Doubt Argument

Russell introduces the first argument as a test for determining whether one is acquainted with something. He considers a table in front of him, and says that, although he is directly aware of the appearance of his table, his awareness of the table itself is another story [74]:

My knowledge of the table as a physical object, on the contrary, is not direct knowledge. Such as it is, it is obtained through acquaintance with the sense-data that make up the appearance of the table. We have seen that it is possible, without absurdity, to doubt whether there is a table at all, whereas it is not possible to doubt the sense-data.

Here Russell suggests that one can determine whether one is acquainted with something by considering whether one can (without absurdity) doubt that it exists. Russell can doubt that his table exists—perhaps by entertaining some sceptical scenario. So, he concludes that he isn't acquainted with his table. But he cannot doubt that his experience of the table exists. So, he concludes that he is acquainted with his experience. This suggests the following test: one is acquainted with something if and only if one cannot doubt that it exists.⁷ Hence, Russell is acquainted with his experience of his table, but isn't acquainted with the table itself. We can run this test on my earlier example, too: I can doubt that the rain exists by entertaining some sceptical hypothesis. I can suppose that an evil demon is tricking me about the rain. But I cannot doubt that my experiences of the rain exist. Even an evil demon couldn't trick me about *that*. Thus, Russell's

⁷ Now, elsewhere Russell [210] says, 'All our knowledge of truths is infected with *some* degree of doubt.' However, in these passages he is specifically talking about knowledge of *truths*, not knowledge by acquaintance. Commentators generally agree that, for Russell, acquaintance with something yields indubitable knowledge of 'the fact of its existence' (Proops [2015: 50]; see also [Wishon \[forthcoming\]](#)). So, my discussion of the relationship between doubt and acquaintance should be understood as concerning our (in)ability to doubt the fact of something's existence rather than our (in)ability to doubt *truths* about that thing. Some may prefer to focus on knowledge of truths. Then just note that, according to Russell, no such knowledge is *absolutely* beyond doubt. So, the standards for his doubt test may have to be adjusted.

test—what I’ll call ‘The Doubt Test’—delivers the results that I am acquainted with my rain experiences, but not with the rain itself.

Russell never explains why The Doubt Test is a good test for acquaintance. But there is a fairly straightforward rationale: if I am aware of some x , but only in virtue of some distinct y indicating x ’s existence, then I can doubt that y is a faithful witness, so to speak, to the existence of x . If a weather report says that it’s raining, then I can doubt that there is rain, because I can doubt that the weather report got it right. So, if I *cannot* doubt that x exists, it must be that I am *directly* aware of x itself rather than of some potentially false or misleading presentation of x that would allow me to doubt its existence. When I experience a sharp pain, for instance, and cannot doubt that it exists, I must be directly aware of that pain.⁸

The Doubt Test hearkens to Descartes’ Method of Doubt. Many philosophers have used it. Examples include H.H. Price [1931], C.I. Lewis [1946], Roderick Chisholm [1957: ch. 5], and, more recently, David Chalmers [1996: ch. 5], Laurence Bonjour [1999], Katalin Balog [2012], and Brie Gertler [2012]. Although few philosophers explicitly cite The Doubt Test, and even fewer spell out its details, there are countless appeals to something like The Doubt Test in the literature on acquaintance and The Given.

Yet it isn’t so clear how, exactly, to understand The Doubt Test. In fact, it’s even unclear whether all of those who appeal to The Doubt Test have in mind the same version of it. So, some clarification is in order. Although I cannot speak for everyone, I hope to capture the spirit of The Doubt Test in its most plausible form.

To start with, The Doubt Test is a *first-personal* test for acquaintance. I can use it to test whether *I* am acquainted with something. And you can use it to test whether *you* are acquainted with something. But we cannot use it for each other. I cannot use it to determine whether you are acquainted with a pain, for instance.

The Doubt Test is also limited in that it’s exclusively concerned with one’s ability to doubt the existence of something of *which* one is, or at least seems to be, *aware*. One may be unable to doubt other kinds of things, like the truth of a fact such as $2+2 = 4$. But that’s different from being unable to doubt the existence of something of which one seems to be aware. That one cannot doubt that $2+2 = 4$ is true doesn’t mean that one is aware of a particular entity whose existence one cannot doubt. This distinction between (*de re*) awareness of something and (*de dicto*) awareness that such-and-such is the case parallels Russell’s distinction between knowledge of things (of which acquaintance is a species) and knowledge of truths. And so, as one might expect, The Doubt Test only applies to potential objects of acquaintance—to things of which one is, or seems to be, aware.

As for what it means to *doubt* something, those who use The Doubt Test are most often concerned with doubt in an *epistemic* sense.⁹ The idea is that if one cannot doubt

⁸ Notice that this justifies the inference from inability to doubt to acquaintance, but not from acquaintance to inability to doubt. I will return to this issue in section 3.3. However, the argument for acquaintance below relies only on the inference from inability to doubt to acquaintance. So, this issue can be safely ignored for now.

⁹ The alternative would be to focus on *psychological* doubt. If one cannot psychologically doubt that some x exists, then one is maximally convinced that x exists and so will be unwilling to give up the belief that x exists. There are various difficulties with understanding The Doubt Test along these lines—for example, since different people have different psychological temperaments, it’s unlikely that there would be any consensus about what can, and what can’t be, doubted psychologically. So, I will set this version of the test aside. For further discussion, see Duncan [2015].

that *x* exists, then one's belief that *x* exists has a high level—perhaps the highest level—of epistemic justification. Some might say that the belief is *infallible*. However, even among acquaintance theorists who endorse The Doubt Test, there is disagreement as to whether any of our beliefs are infallible. In fact, there's even disagreement about what it would take for a belief to be infallible [Reed 2002]. We should avoid these controversies. Perhaps a better way to understand doubt is in terms of *incorrigibility*. Following Alston [1971] and Reed [2002], a belief is incorrigible just in case its epistemic justification cannot be overturned. This more closely approximates what I take to be doubt in the epistemic sense.

However, I prefer to think of epistemic doubt in terms of *immunity to scepticism*. This offers a particularly clear way to get a grip on epistemic doubt, and it fits well with how The Doubt Test has historically been used. The idea is that if, given one's seeming awareness of *x*, one can rule out *a priori* all sceptical scenarios in which *x* does not exist, then one cannot doubt that *x* exists. There is a very intuitive understanding of this idea that has been present throughout our discussion. We've seen that Russell's table and the rain in front of me are susceptible to sceptical scenarios, perhaps involving evil demons or hallucinations; but that our *experiences* aren't susceptible to such scenarios. For example, right now it seems to me that I am aware of both the rain and my experiences of the rain. But, given the way things seem to me, I can't rule out all sceptical scenarios in which the rain does not exist. I could be a brain in a vat. Then things might seem to me as they do even though it would not actually be raining. On the other hand, I *can* rule out all sceptical scenarios in which my *experiences* of the rain don't exist. For no evil demon or computer could make it *seem* to me like my rain-experiences exist without also bringing it about that my rain-experiences *do*, in fact, exist. After all, those experiences constitute part of the way that things seem to me. Thus, given the way that things seem to me, I can rule out all sceptical scenarios in which my rain-experiences don't exist. Hence, I cannot doubt that my rain experiences exist.¹⁰

And so, with that, here is The Doubt Test:

The Doubt Test. If it seems to *S* that she is aware of some *x*, and, given that seeming awareness of *x*, *S* is able to rule out all sceptical scenarios in which *x* does not exist, then *S* is acquainted with *x*. Otherwise, *S* is not acquainted with *x*.

This yields a plausible version of Russell's test for acquaintance. But how does all of this constitute an *argument* for the claim that we can be acquainted with our experiences? The argument, I take it, is this:

- (1) One is acquainted with *x* if and only if *x* passes The Doubt Test.
- (2) Some of our experiences pass The Doubt Test.
- (3) Therefore, we are acquainted with some of our experiences.

I'll call this 'the doubt argument'. It's valid. And (2) looks good—surely at least some of our experiences pass The Doubt Test. For example, I cannot doubt that *this* pain in my knee exists: there is no sceptical scenario in which things seem just as they do but in which that pain doesn't exist. For that pain is part of the way that things seem to me. This leaves (1). Again, the primary justification for (1)—for the legitimacy of The Doubt Test—is this: if I am aware of some *x*, but only in virtue of some distinct *y*

¹⁰ This approach is briefly discussed by Chalmers [1996] and spelled out in more detail by Duncan [2015].

indicating x 's existence, then I can doubt that y is a faithful witness to the existence of x ; thus, if I *cannot* doubt that x exists, then I must be *directly* aware of x *itself* rather than of some potentially misleading presentation of x .¹¹ In addition to this justification, The Doubt Test also has a certain intuitive appeal, as evidenced by how many philosophers have used it. So, although I won't pretend to have settled the matter, it's fair to say that a plausible Russell-inspired argument for acquaintance has been unearthed.

3.2 The Regress Argument

The second argument for acquaintance is even less explicit in Russell [1912] than the first argument is. Russell starts by distinguishing between 'knowledge by acquaintance' and 'knowledge by description' [72–4]. The former involves direct awareness of something; the latter does not. Hence, Russell says that, while appearances of a table are 'immediately known to me just as they are', it's another matter with the table itself [74]:

My knowledge of the table as a physical object, on the contrary, is not direct knowledge. Such as it is, it is obtained through acquaintance with the sense-data that make up the appearance of the table ... My knowledge of the table is of the kind which we shall call 'knowledge by description'. The table is 'the physical object which causes such-and-such sense-data'.

According to Russell, all knowledge of things is either knowledge by acquaintance or knowledge by description. Furthermore—and he repeatedly stresses this—*all knowledge derives from knowledge by acquaintance*. He says, 'In order to know anything at all about the table, we must know truths connecting it with things with which we have acquaintance' [ibid.]. Then he adds, 'All our knowledge, both knowledge of things and knowledge of truths, rests upon acquaintance as its foundation' [75]. And, according to Russell, it's not just that all knowledge *in fact* derives from acquaintance; rather, it *must* do so [91].

Russell's reason for this conclusion is spelled out a little more explicitly in an earlier paper [1911], where he considers the possibility that we aren't acquainted with the objects of our judgments and instead are only aware of 'ideas' that mediate our awareness of those objects. He says this [ibid.: 119–20]:

[This view] leads at once to a vicious endless regress, since the relation of idea to the object will have to be explained by supposing that the idea itself has an idea of the object, and so on *ad infinitum*.

Russell [ibid.: 127] later revisits this worry, and says that the regress looms just in case we are 'hindered by lack of acquaintance'. He thus concludes that 'we need acquaintance with the constituents of the description' [ibid.].

There's a lot to unpack here, and I won't attempt to unpack it all.¹² I'll just highlight three claims from these passages that plausibly lead to a second argument for acquaintance. First, Russell claims that, in some sense, all knowledge *depends on* knowledge by acquaintance. Second, he claims that all knowledge must somehow terminate or *bottom out* with knowledge by acquaintance: that is, acquaintance must be the stopping point—the foundation for all other knowledge. Third, he claims that, unless we accept these first two claims, we will be left with a vicious infinite regress.

¹¹ Not everyone who uses The Doubt Test gives a rationale for it. But those who do so typically give the rationale above. See, for example, Price [1932: 7–12], Chalmers [1996: 195–6], and Gertler [2012: 94].

¹² See Wishon and Linsky [2015] for several papers that tease out the many issues raised in these passages.

Now, as I've said, Russell thinks that acquaintance with something automatically yields knowledge of it [73]. But, again, most contemporary acquaintance theorists deny this. So, in fleshing out the second Russell-inspired argument for acquaintance, I won't assume that acquaintance automatically yields knowledge. And so I'll reformulate the above claims in terms of *awareness*, not knowledge, as follows: all awareness depends on direct awareness (that is, acquaintance), and all awareness must somehow *bottom out* with acquaintance; otherwise, we will be left with a vicious infinite regress.

These are claims, not arguments. But, with a little reflection, it's possible to unearth a *regress* argument for acquaintance. Here's the idea. We must be directly aware of something. Otherwise we would face an infinite regress. For suppose that I am not directly aware of anything. Then, when I am aware of some *x*, it is in virtue of being aware of some distinct *y*. And since I am not directly aware of *y* either (and presumably not aware of *y* in virtue of being aware of *x*), there must be some distinct *z* in virtue of which I am aware of *y*. But then of course there has to be something else in virtue of which I am aware of *z* ..., and so on. Thus, if I am not directly aware of anything, then whenever I am aware of something, I am the subject of infinite awarenesses of infinitely many things. But that's absurd—I am not aware of infinitely many things. So I must be directly aware of something.¹³

This argument, if sound, establishes that we are sometimes acquainted with something. It doesn't yet establish that we are acquainted with our *experiences*. But this next step is no great leap. For the most likely terminus for our awareness of things is our experiences. Thus, we may conclude that we can be, and sometimes are, directly aware of our experiences.

We might put this argument, which I'll call 'the regress argument', as follows:

- (1) If, for example, I am not directly aware of anything, then, whenever I am aware of anything, I am aware of infinitely many things.
- (2) I am aware of something.
- (3) I am not aware of infinitely many things.
- (4) Therefore, I am directly aware of something.
- (5) If I am directly aware of anything, I am directly aware of my current experiences.
- (6) Therefore, I am directly aware of (at least some of) my current experiences.

This argument is about *my* current situation. But it can be extended to anyone's. So, if this argument is sound, we may conclude that we can be, and sometimes are, acquainted with our experiences.

Is this argument sound? Well, it's valid. (2) and (3) are true. And (4) follows from (1), (2), and (3). That leaves (1) and (5). I will return to (1) in the next section, but its rough justification is spelled out above. (5) seems plausible, but one could deny it. In fact, some do.¹⁴ I don't have space to fully defend (5) here, but notice that the reasoning from the previous section can also be used to support (5). Here's the idea: I can doubt the existence of all sorts of things, including external objects, but I cannot doubt that

¹³ It's important to distinguish this *regress* argument for acquaintance, which is based on a regress of *awareness*, from regress arguments regarding *justification* (e.g., Bonjour [2003]; Bergmann [2006]). I am not addressing the latter.

¹⁴ See, for example, Harman [1990] and Tye [2000].

my experiences exist. Why? Plausibly, because there is no potentially misleading presentation of my experiences mediating my awareness of them. The same can't be said for my awareness of other things, such as external objects. So, if I am directly aware of anything, it must be my experiences. Hence, (5).

Thus, this argument looks to be sound. So, another plausible Russell-inspired argument for acquaintance has been unearthed.

3.3 Two Arguments

Each of the above two arguments for acquaintance is, plausibly, sound. But now I'll argue that they can't both be sound. If one is, the other isn't.

Start by considering an objection to the second argument—the regress argument—for acquaintance. The objection goes like this: its premise (1) is false. Specifically, the inference from not being acquainted with anything to being aware of infinitely many things is fallacious. To see this, consider the *inner sense theory* of self-knowledge.¹⁵ According to the inner sense theory, introspection is akin to perception, in that one's awareness of one's mental states is mediated by a *causal process* that establishes a link of awareness between a subject and her mental states. So, just as my visual awareness of the rain outside involves a complex causal process—photons bouncing off the rain and exciting my retina, optic nerve, and eventually my visual cortex—so, too, my awareness of my experience involves a causal process that begins with my experience and ends with my awareness of it. There are various versions of the inner sense theory [Gertler 2011: ch. 5]. But further details needn't occupy us here. The key point is that, on the inner sense theory, my awareness of my experiences is *indirect*—it's mediated by a causal process—and yet it's not as if I am aware of my experiences in virtue of being aware of some distinct thing, let alone infinitely many things. What this shows is that one's awareness of *x* could be indirect without being mediated by awareness of some distinct *y*. It could instead be mediated by some sort of process, such as a causal process. So, one's being indirectly aware of *x* does not imply that one is aware of something other than *x*. Thus, the claim that we aren't acquainted with anything does not imply that if I am aware of anything then I am aware of infinitely many things. So, the regress argument's (1) is false.¹⁶

This objection relies on the claim that awareness mediated by a causal process counts as indirect. It's not clear whether Russell would accept this claim. But many contemporary acquaintance theorists do (see, for example, Gertler [ibid.: 95]). So, perhaps the regress argument for acquaintance must go.

However, one could respond to this objection by denying that mediation by a causal process is enough on its own to make one's awareness indirect. One could say that one is directly aware of something if and only if one is aware of it but not in virtue of *being aware of any other thing*. So, then, even the inner sense theory doesn't preclude our

¹⁵ Defenders of the inner sense theory include Armstrong [1968], Dretske [1994], and Lycan [1996].

¹⁶ A friend of acquaintance might try to save (1) by attacking the inner sense theory. But that wouldn't be enough. My discussion of the inner sense theory is simply meant to *illustrate* the fallacy in (1). To save (1), one would have to show that it's impossible to be aware of some *x* indirectly without also being aware of some distinct *y*. In other words, one would have to show that awareness mediated *just* by a causal process is impossible. This would involve showing, among other things, that the inner sense theory, direct realism, and any other possible theory that posits such mediation are necessarily false. That's a tall order; and one that would almost certainly take us well beyond Russell's [1911, 1912] arguments for acquaintance, which are my focus here.

being directly aware of our experiences. And so it no longer threatens the regress argument's (1).

This response may seem *ad hoc* at first. But there is a precedent for understanding direct awareness in this way. So-called 'direct realists' about perception are a case in point.¹⁷ They generally don't deny that our perceptual awareness of objects in our environment is mediated by causal processes. And yet they still contend that we can be, and indeed often are, directly aware of those external objects. So, perhaps it's fair to say that mediation by a causal process isn't enough to make awareness indirect. And so perhaps the regress argument for acquaintance can be saved, after all.

That response may save the regress argument. But it comes at a cost: the demise of the doubt argument. Recall that premise (1) of the doubt argument (section 3.1) says that one is acquainted with *x* if and only if *x* passes The Doubt Test: that is, one is acquainted with *x* if and only if, given one's seeming awareness of *x*, one cannot doubt that *x* exists. But one can doubt the existence of things of which one is aware via causal processes, even if one's awareness is unmediated by awareness of other things. To see this, suppose that direct realism is true, and that the only thing mediating my awareness of the computer in front of me is the causal process involved in ordinary perception. In this case, I can doubt that the computer exists, by supposing that that causal process is *deviant* in such a way that I am not in fact in perceptual contact with the computer. For example, I can suppose that a drug is causing me to *hallucinate* a computer, as Macbeth hallucinated a dagger.¹⁸ Or I can suppose that an evil demon is firing a complex array of photons directly onto my retina, while also diverting any other photons headed my way, so that my visual system is stimulated in such a way that I have an experience as of a computer. Or I can suppose that I'm in the Matrix, dreaming, etc. There are many ways that this could go. The point is that I can suppose that something is manipulating, overriding, or supplanting the causal process that would normally mediate my awareness of the computer, so that, although it seems to me that I'm aware of a computer, in fact I'm not—there is no computer. More generally, whenever a causal process mediates my awareness of some *x*, I can doubt the existence of *x* by supposing that the causal process in question is abnormal in such a way that, although it seems to me that I am aware of *x*, I am mistaken and in fact *x* does not exist. So, if one can be acquainted with things of which one is aware via causal processes (as the above amendment to the regress argument requires), then one can doubt the existence of things with which one is acquainted. Then it's *not* true that one is acquainted with *x* if and only if one cannot doubt that *x* exists. So, then, the doubt argument's (1) is false. The doubt argument fails.

One might respond on behalf of the doubt argument by saying that experiences are a special case—that, although one can *usually* doubt the existence of things of which one is aware via causal processes, that's not true of experiences. Why? Because, when it comes to experiences, there is no distinction between appearance and reality. The appearance of pain, for example, *just is* pain. So, there's no sceptical scenario in which

¹⁷ Direct realists include Hinton [1973], McDowell [1994], Langsam [1997], and Brewer [2000]. Some representationalists, such as Harman [1990] and Tye [2000], also say that we can be directly aware of external objects.

¹⁸ Direct realists who are *disjunctivists* maintain that veridical perceptions and hallucinations are different kinds of experiences. But even they acknowledge that an hallucination may be introspectively indistinguishable from a veridical perception such that the latter are susceptible to sceptical scenarios like the ones above (see, e.g., Martin [2006] for a helpful discussion of these issues).

it seems to me that I'm in pain, but in which I'm not in pain. Thus, regardless of whether or not my awareness of my pain is mediated by a causal process, I cannot doubt that it exists. Maybe this point can be exploited to save premise (1) of the doubt argument, at least as it applies to experiences.

This is a false hope. First of all, acquaintance theorists typically argue that the *reason* why there is no appearance/reality distinction when it comes to experiences is precisely because we are directly aware of our experiences *in the strict sense* whereby mediation by a causal process is excluded (for example, Chalmers [1996: 195]; Gertler [2012: sec. 5]). So, friends of acquaintance are unlikely to accept that this lack of distinction would exist regardless of whether or not we are aware of our experiences via causal processes. And even if they did, still this wouldn't save the doubt argument. For (1) in the doubt argument entails that if one is acquainted with *x—any x*—then one cannot doubt that *x* exists. And this simply isn't true if acquaintance includes awareness via causal processes. I can doubt the existence of at least *some* things of which I am or could be aware via causal processes alone—my computer may be an example. What this shows is that the inference from acquaintance (in the weakened sense) to indubitability is fallacious.

Now, friends of acquaintance may very well deny that I am aware of my computer or other perceptual objects *only* via causal processes. They may say that, in actual fact, I am also aware of them via awareness of sense data or other experiential entities, and that this mediation is the reason why I can doubt that my computer exists. This may be true *in actual fact*. But the point is that, once we've seen how causal process can go awry or be disrupted so as potentially to mislead us about what exists, we can see that the inference from awareness via causal processes to indubitability is simply no good.¹⁹ As Chalmers [1996: 195] puts it:

Where there is causation, there is contingency: a causal connection that holds might not have held ... There will always be a skeptical scenario in which everything seems just the same to the subject, but in which the causal connection is absent and in which X does not exist; so the subject cannot know for certain about X.

So, here's the upshot: causal processes can go awry. So, awareness via causal process is susceptible to doubt. Thus, if acquaintance includes awareness via causal processes (as the regress argument requires), then (1) in the doubt argument is false.²⁰

So if the regress argument is sound, the doubt argument is *unsound*. The converse also holds. If the doubt argument is sound, the regress argument is *unsound*. For the doubt argument rules out what the regress argument must allow—namely, acquaintance via causal processes. More carefully, if the doubt argument is sound, then its (1) is true—one is acquainted with something if and only if, given one's seeming awareness

¹⁹ And if one is still worried about my hypothetical appeal to direct realism, we can adjust the case. Drop direct realism, and assume that my awareness of my computer is mediated *both* by a causal process *and* by my experience. Now, imagine that the evil demon manipulates *only* the causal process involved in perception (as described above), not the content of my experience. So, it's the disruption in the causal process, not my experience, that's responsible for my being misled about my computer's existence. This example doesn't assume direct realism, but it still illustrates how mediation by a causal process opens up room for doubt.

²⁰ To overturn this verdict, a defender of the above arguments would have to find a way to resist the apparent counterexamples to the modified version of the doubt argument's (1), and she would have to find a way to explain how, although causal processes *in general* can be disrupted, this isn't the case when it comes to objects of awareness. Furthermore, she would have to do this in a way that is compelling to more than those already committed to acquaintance. I won't say that this can't be done—friends of acquaintance are free to pursue whatever course they wish—but, for what it's worth, I'm not optimistic. Furthermore, as it will turn out, there are what I think are clearly better options for friends of acquaintance. So, I'll set aside the above strategy.

of that thing, one cannot doubt that it exists. And one can doubt the existence of things of which one is aware via causal processes (regardless of whether or not one's awareness is also mediated by awareness of other things). Thus, by the doubt argument's (1), one is not acquainted with things of which one is aware via causal processes. But this does not imply that one is ever aware of infinitely many things. For one's lack of acquaintance with something might not be due to one's being aware of anything else; it might be due to an intervening causal process. So, if the doubt argument's (1) is true, then the regress argument's (1) is false and the regress argument is unsound. Hence, if the doubt argument is sound, the regress argument is unsound.

So, although each of the above arguments seems plausible, no more than one can succeed. If one is sound, the other isn't.

4. Options

So, we have options. The first option is to accept that the regress argument is sound and thus to accept that one can be acquainted with something mediated by causal processes. On this approach, one is acquainted with x if and only if one is aware of x but not in virtue of being aware of any distinct y . This revised notion of 'acquaintance' fits with how some philosophers talk about direct awareness via perception. But it conflicts with usage common among acquaintance theorists, since it allows that one can be acquainted with something of which one is aware via something else. So, although this option does in some sense save the claim that we are sometimes acquainted with our experiences, it doesn't do this in a way that would satisfy many acquaintance theorists.

And there are other difficulties with this option. It of course renders the doubt argument unsound. But it also makes the claim of acquaintance—that we can be, and sometimes are, directly aware of our experiences—less interesting. Acquaintance theorists want to say that our access to our experiences is *special*. And it is special because it is, in some important sense, especially *direct*. But if the directness of this awareness potentially does not distinguish it from our awareness of external objects, for example, then the specialness of this awareness evaporates. Acquaintance becomes unremarkable; which raises another problem with this first option. The original claim of acquaintance is remarkable. It says that we can be aware of our experiences without *any* intermediary. There is a clear sense in which our awareness of external objects is indirect. After all, it's mediated by *something*—namely, a causal process. But this might not be true of our experiences. Thus, accepting this first option not only makes the claim of acquaintance relatively uninteresting; it also obscures a claim that *is* interesting. So, one who accepts this first option along with the regress argument for acquaintance may be happy to get her conclusion. But this is not the prize for which we (including Russell) set out.

The second option regarding the two above arguments is to accept that the doubt argument is sound. This option restores the original and more interesting notion of 'acquaintance'. But then the regress argument must go.

There's a third option that may seem to be the best of both worlds. It turns out there is a way to craft a new doubt argument that, plausibly, is sound and yet does not rule out the regress argument. This requires changing what it means to pass The Doubt Test. Notice that The Doubt Test implies this *bi-conditional*: one is acquainted with x if and only if, given one's seeming awareness of x , one cannot doubt that x exists. This is

how Russell seems to describe the test. But consider this *conditional* version of The Doubt Test: if, given one's seeming awareness of x , one cannot doubt that x exists, then one is acquainted with x . On this version of the test, it's still the case that we can infer that we are acquainted with our experiences from the fact that we cannot doubt that they exist. So, the doubt argument still succeeds. But now the regress argument isn't threatened, either. For now one can say that we are acquainted with things mediated by causal processes, and yet also acknowledge that we can doubt the existence of such things. This is because, in its conditional form, The Doubt Test does not commit us to the inference from ability to doubt to lack of acquaintance. It commits us only to the inference from inability to doubt to acquaintance.

Interestingly, this conditional version of The Doubt Test actually fits better with its primary justification than Russell's bi-conditional version does. Again, that justification is this: if I am aware of some x , but only in virtue of some distinct y indicating x 's existence, then I can doubt that y is a faithful witness to the existence of x ; thus, if I *cannot* doubt that x exists, then I must be *directly* aware of x *itself* rather than of some potentially misleading presentation of x . This justifies the inference from lack of doubt to acquaintance, but not from acquaintance to lack of doubt. Hence, the primary justification for The Doubt Test supports its conditional version, not the bi-conditional version. So, then perhaps this third option is the best of both worlds. We can accept a new version of the doubt argument—a better version of it, in fact—while also accepting the regress argument.

This is tempting. But I think that we should resist this third option. I say this because, at this point—that is, without substantial further development—the regress argument is more trouble than it's worth. It is either unsound or uninteresting. For it's sound only if we adopt a less substantial notion of 'acquaintance', according to which we can be acquainted with things of which we are aware via causal processes. Thus, the regress argument for acquaintance should be abandoned.

This brings us back to option two: namely, accept Russell's doubt argument and reject the regress argument. This closely approximates what I think is the best option. However, the above reflection on the conditional vs bi-conditional versions of The Doubt Test reveals an even better (fourth) option: namely, accept the doubt argument—but with the *conditional* version of The Doubt Test—and yet still reject the regress argument. So, the new doubt argument is this:

- (1) If x passes The (conditional) Doubt Test—that is, if, given one's seeming awareness of x , one cannot doubt that x exists—then one is acquainted with x .
- (2) Some of our experiences pass The Doubt Test.
- (3) Therefore, we are acquainted with some of our experiences.

This argument provides a good reason to believe that we can be, and sometimes are, acquainted with our experiences. Thus, I accept the fourth option: I accept the revised doubt argument and reject the regress argument.

One final option that I haven't considered is to reject both the doubt and regress arguments. Since my aims for this paper were to unearth two arguments for acquaintance, show how they are related to each other, and indicate how and whether they are plausible, it is beyond the scope of this paper to give a sustained defence of the doubt argument. Some who deny that we can be acquainted with our experiences may seize on this shortcoming. However, even at this point of development, the doubt argument

poses a serious challenge to acquaintance-deniers. For it reveals a striking asymmetry between our awareness of our experiences and our awareness of other things. At least sometimes, I cannot doubt that a pain, visual sensation, or other experience exists. This is never the case with external objects. They are always susceptible to doubt. So, at the very least, it is incumbent upon deniers of acquaintance to explain (or explain away) this apparent asymmetry. For what it's worth, I doubt that this can be done.²¹

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²¹ Thanks to Brie Gertler, Trip Glazer, Harold Langsam, Jared Peterson, Glenn Rawson, Tomoji Shogenji, Donovan Wishon, two anonymous referees, and audiences at the Central APA and the University of St. Thomas for help on this paper.

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