

ACQUAINTANCE, PHYSICAL OBJECTS, AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE SELF

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There have been several recent attempts in the philosophical literature to accommodate alternative epistemological and metaphysical systems within the general framework of Russell's notion of acquaintance. Christopher Peacocke, Mark Sainsbury and David Woodruff Smith have each advanced a model of perception that holds that physical objects in the world, and not just sense-data, are possible objects of Russellian acquaintance.

But Russell's notion of acquaintance is profoundly inappropriate to the direct realist theory of perception. Any attempt to expand the extension of Russellian acquaintance entails abandoning central elements in Russell's notion of acquaintance. In my assessment of the applicability of Russellian acquaintance to direct realism, I will also examine Russell's position on the problem of knowledge of the self since these two problems are closely connected, and since Russell's views on the nature of acquaintance could have been developed in a way that would have allowed for acquaintance with the self.

Like many of his philosophical views, Russell's views on acquaintance underwent considerable revision throughout his lifetime. Although Russell later backed away from the notion of acquaintance, contemporary commentators continue to employ his distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description and to be inspired by his analysis of experience in terms of the relation of direct presentation. In their attempts to reconstruct Russellian acquaintance, contemporary commentators appeal to Russell's earlier views, setting aside his subsequent reservations about the notion of acquaintance. Evaluating Russell's philosophical legacy therefore requires singling out the views on acquaintance that he held at the

beginning of this century. But in focusing on these earlier views, it must be remembered that Russell's ideas on acquaintance were subject to constant revision.

Russellian acquaintance remains attractive to contemporary commentators largely because modern philosophers grapple with many of the same problems that fascinated Russell. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of the problem of the elusiveness of the self in introspection. In his 1913 manuscript, *Theory of Knowledge*, Russell claims that "We can easily become aware of our own experiences, but we seem never to become aware of the subject itself" (*TK*, p. 36). Heavily influenced by Russell, Colin McGinn believes that, "When you are aware of your experience as of the setting sun, you are aware of the experience as *your* experience as of the setting sun",¹ even though the self is not the proper object of introspective awareness or self-consciousness. Like Russell, Michael E. Levin is interested in the identity of the subject of second-order awareness, or awareness of an awareness. Levin argues that, "When I am aware of my awareness of my foot, what is the 'I' that has this second-order awareness? I can see no reason why it cannot be the same 'I' that is its object—the central nervous system, or whatever persons turn out actually to be."² Struggling with the very same problems, it is only natural that contemporary commentators should help themselves to Russell's analytical apparatus, and employ reconstructed versions of Russellian acquaintance.

Philosophers of perception have generally focused on questions like: What are the direct or immediate objects of perception? But an equally interesting question is: What do we know when we know we perceive? Russell's initial answer to this question is in terms of acquaintance with the self. In *The Problems of Philosophy*, he is willing to allow that "in some sense it would seem we must be acquainted with our Selves as opposed to our particular experiences.... [A]lthough acquaintance with ourselves seems *probably* to occur, it is not wise to assert that it undoubtedly does occur" (*PP*₃, p. 28). Thereafter, Russell slid further into scepticism about the self, first, by denying that we are ever acquainted with the self, and maintaining instead that we are

¹ Colin McGinn, *The Character of Mind* (London: Oxford U.P., 1982), p. 52.

² Michael E. Levin, "Phenomenal Properties", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 42 (1981–82): 55.

merely acquainted with complexes in which acquaintance is a constituent, and secondly, by rejecting altogether the notion of a substantive self, choosing instead to "regard the subject ... as a logical construction" (*ibid.*, pp. 97–8).

Labouring under the shadow of Hume, Russell was persuaded by the Humean case against awareness of a bare self. Yet, within Russell's notion of acquaintance lay all of the necessary ingredients for an account of acquaintance with the self that does not depend upon catching glimpses of a bare self. The solution lies in Russell's largely overlooked notion of learning to be acquainted with objects.

RUSSELL'S NOTION OF ACQUAINTANCE

Russell divides all knowledge into two categories: knowledge of truths and knowledge of things. He then distinguishes between two sorts of knowledge of things: knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description, although he insists at one point that "Immediate experience" is "the only real knowledge of things" (*TK*, p. 32). One has knowledge by acquaintance of an object or thing when that knowledge is direct or immediate, and is not the result of any process of inference. Something is known by acquaintance when it stands in the relation of presentation, or is directly presented, to the knower. Russell maintains that we are acquainted with our own sense-data, with universal properties and relations, and, at least in his earlier writings, with ourselves. He warns us that "among the objects with which we are acquainted are not included physical objects (as opposed to sense-data), nor other people's minds."³

For Russell, a physical object is "an inference" or "theoretical construction" (*TK*, pp. 44, 43). We cannot be acquainted with physical objects because mere inferences or theoretical constructions cannot be the object of any presentation. Yet, abstract mathematical facts are no more ontologically robust than theoretical constructions, and Russell holds that such abstract facts can be objects of presentation. Perhaps the difference lies in the fact that theoretical constructions, unlike

abstract mathematical facts, are something that we create, rather than discover, and are thus not part of mind-independent reality. But Russell also holds that we are presented, and thus acquainted, with the objects of our own imagination, and these imagined objects are no less created by us than our theoretical constructions.

Russell employs the terms "acquaintance", "awareness" and "experience" synonymously (*TK*, p. 38). He explains that "when *A* experiences an object *O*, we shall say that *A* is acquainted with *O*" (p. 35). Although it is possible to be acquainted with, or aware of, one's own acquaintance with *O*, one cannot be acquainted with, or aware of, anyone else's acquaintance with *O*. In Russell's words: "The experiencing of *O* by *A* may be experienced by *A*, and the experiencing of *O* by *B* may be experienced by *B*, but neither can experience the other's experiencing" (*ibid.*). Russell believes that it is the ability to experience our experiencing that best explains our arriving at the notion that we have experiences. He insists that "there is such a fact as 'experiencing', and ... this fact itself may be experienced" (p. 99). What best explains our arriving at the notion that we have perceptual experiences is thus the experiencing of our perceptual experiences, or the experiencing of our perceiving.

THE ATTEMPT TO APPLY RUSSELLIAN ACQUAINTANCE TO PHYSICAL OBJECTS

Christopher Peacocke offers a "reconstruction of Russell's concept of acquaintance" involving "modes of presentation", or "m.p.'s", such that we "need to use a three-place relation between a person, object, and type of m.p.: that of the person being acquainted with that object relative to that type."⁴ While Russell views acquaintance as a direct, two-term or dyadic relation between subject and object, Peacocke reconstructs Russellian acquaintance in terms of a three-term or triadic relation. Peacocke explains that "I am acquainted with the pen I am now using relative to a certain perceptual type of m.p., which presents a pen in a certain way in my visual field" (*ibid.*). He claims that the

³ "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description", in *Mysticism and Logic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1954), p. 201; *Papers* 6: 151.

⁴ Christopher Peacocke, *Sense and Content: Experience, Thought, and their Relations* (London: Oxford U.P., 1983), p. 182.

merit of his analysis is that it preserves a feature of the "Russellian conception" inasmuch as it retains the idea that "in being acquainted with something the subject is able to think of it in a particular way in virtue of his bearing a certain *relation* to it." Peacocke thus rejects Russell's views about the extension of the notion of acquaintance, and expands the notion to include physical objects in the world as possible objects of acquaintance.

In fairness to Peacocke, Russell's talk of the objects of acquaintance being "presented to" the subject suggests that the objects have a mode of being presented, a mode of presentation. Russell also insists that the relation of acquaintance is simply the converse relation of the relation of presentation, so that *S*'s being acquainted with *O* is merely *O* being presented to *S*. But Russell builds more than mere presentation into his notion of acquaintance. Any reconstruction of Russell's notion of acquaintance that neglects these additional elements cannot do justice to Russell's original contrast between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description.

Certainly, any talk of our "bearing a certain *relation*" to objects of acquaintance, where these relations are anything other than the relations of acquaintance and presentation, conflicts with Russell's firm position that an object of acquaintance in, say, our visual space, is known "perfectly and completely when I see it, and no further knowledge of it itself is even theoretically possible" (*PP*, p. 25). Since anything known from a particular perspective or point of view may at least theoretically be known from an alternative perspective or point of view, our knowledge of it will be incomplete, and thus imperfect. It will always be at least theoretically possible to acquire further knowledge of whatever is known only from one perspective or point of view. Peacocke's suggestion that "*a* is acquainted with *x* relative to *M*" (p. 184) is surely to admit that *x* is not known completely, perfectly and indubitably, but is instead known only relative to that *M*.

In raising this objection from perspectival limitations, I have in mind Russell's claim that, "If I say 'this', pointing to some visible object, what another man sees is not exactly the same as what I see, because he looks from a different place" (*TK*, p. 29). If what we see is different from what others see, due to the fact that we look from different places or points of view, then what we see is incomplete and imperfect to the extent that it omits the theoretically obtainable per-

spectives of others. A perspective that admits supplemental perspectives or points of view is incomplete and imperfect.

Russell also insists that "the one physical object which is supposed to be seen from different points of view is a theoretical construction, and is not the object of any presentation" (p. 43). There can be no acquaintance with a physical object because there can be no presentation of a mere theoretical construction. Anything given to different perspectives or points of view is a theoretical or logical construction, and thus never an object of direct presentation or acquaintance. Objects of presentation are not given from points of view, and are therefore not subject to perspectival limitations or distortion. The fact that the objects of direct visual presentation are "immediate visual data from the different points of view" (*ibid.*) does not entail that we are acquainted with that data only relative to those points of view. It is our acquisition of, rather than our acquaintance with, the visual data that is relative to different perspectives or points of view.

Peacocke's talk of modes of presentation is harmless if what he has in mind are simply perceptual modalities, analogous to Russell's private visual, tactual and aural spaces. But if Peacocke means that we are acquainted with an object relative to a certain perspective or point of view, then his analysis in terms of modes of presentation conflicts seriously with Russell's important stipulation that what is known by acquaintance be known perfectly and completely. There is certainly no room within Russell's account for Peacocke's talk of objects of acquaintance being "clothed with an m.p." (p. 183).

Like Peacocke, Mark Sainsbury explicitly rejects Russell's extension of the notion of acquaintance. Reconstructing Russellian acquaintance, Sainsbury concludes that "Russell's arguments concerning the objects of acquaintance seem to me beyond repair. A correct account, in my view, would show that tables and other physical objects are objects of acquaintance, and would do so by analysing acquaintance in terms of causation and information."⁵ Sainsbury argues that "It is possible to accept Russell's concept of acquaintance, yet reject his views about what the objects of acquaintance are" (p. 219). But if acquaintance is

⁵ "Russell on Acquaintance", in *Philosophers Ancient and Modern*, ed. Godfrey Vesey (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1987), p. 224.

causal, then it is also perspectival, and thus incomplete or partial. For it will always be at least theoretically possible for an alternative causal relation to obtain, and for further information concerning the object of acquaintance to be acquired. Any knowledge of an object that allows at least theoretical room for the acquisition of additional information cannot be infallible and indubitable, and so cannot be a species of Russellian acquaintance.

David Woodruff Smith also reconstructs Russellian acquaintance, arguing that "acquaintance, applied to perception, entails the epistemological doctrine of naive or direct realism, according to which we directly perceive physical objects."⁶ Although Smith claims to follow Russell in preferring the term "acquaintance" to the term "intuition", his insistence that "we are acquainted in perception with physical objects" (*ibid.*) is profoundly incompatible with Russellian acquaintance. Smith's views on acquaintance diverge from Russell's views in more subtle ways. He states that "Acquaintance is a *direct* cognitive awareness of something. Fundamentally, acquaintance is an *intentional* relation. But one is acquainted with something only if it exists: so acquaintance is a successful intentional relation" (p. 43).

Russell maintains that we are acquainted both with things that exist, such as sense-data, and with things that merely subsist, such as universal properties and relations. The relation of acquaintance itself is a two-term relation that "can subsist between subjects and other entities" (*TK*, p. 53). Having mistakenly argued that we are acquainted only with things that exist, Smith is then forced to distinguish between acquaintance and "acquainting" experience.⁷ An acquainting experience is an experience in which "no existing object satisfies the content of the experience." An acquainting experience is thus "a *cognitive* experience in that it 'posits' its object as existing or actual" (p. 44).

Although Russell regards acquaintance with subsisting universals as a cognitive relation, he denies that these things are merely posited. For Russell, the things in the world with which we are acquainted, whether existing or merely subsisting, are objective features of the world that we must discover as cognizers. The subsisting things with

which we are acquainted are thus presented to, rather than merely posited by, us. Russell simply makes no provision for a non-presentational, positing species of acquaintance. On Russell's analysis, it is meaningless or incoherent to suppose that objects of acquaintance might be unreal. The term "unreal" is applicable only to described entities, and not to entities to which it is possible to give a proper name. Russell explains that "An acquaintance which is acquainted with nothing is not an acquaintance, but a mere absurdity" (*TK*, p. 48).

I certainly do not wish to deny that we are acquainted with physical objects in the world. What I am denying is the possibility of reconciling a Russellian account of acquaintance, or at least an account that is held to be in accordance with the spirit of Russell's general ideas, with a theory of perception that maintains that we are acquainted with physical objects. Acquaintance with opaque physical objects in the world would be from one perspective or point of view alone, and, as such, would constitute awareness or knowledge that was less than perfect and complete. It certainly would not qualify as awareness in which no further knowledge is even theoretically possible. If philosophers wish to speak in terms of acquaintance with physical objects, then they must be careful not to suggest that the acquaintance involved is Russellian, or in the spirit of Russell's general ideas. They must admit openly that they are reverting to a less restricted, perhaps Lockean, version of the notion of acquaintance.

W. V. Quine points out that "Russell's ontology was conditioned conspicuously by both his theory of knowledge and his logic."⁸ Russell severely restricted the possible objects of immediate experience through acquaintance because the model of immediate cognition under which he operated viewed direct or immediate knowledge, not simply as non-inferential, but also as complete, perfect, infallible and indubitable. In this way, his ontology of possible objects of acquaintance was conditioned by his model of immediate cognition. R. J. Hirst labels this "belief that perception is or contains an always immediate and intuitive, and so unvaryingly excellent, mode of awareness" the "immediacy assumption."⁹

⁶ "The Realism in Perception", *Noûs*, 16 (1982): 44.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁸ "Russell's Ontological Development", in *Bertrand Russell*, ed. D. F. Pears (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 291.

⁹ *The Problems of Perception* (New York: Humanities P., 1978), p. 30.

THE INDUBITABILITY OF OBJECTS OF ACQUAINTANCE

Peacocke complains that the “implausible components” of Russell’s views are a consequence of “his underlying presupposition ... that the existence of anything with which one is acquainted must be known to one indubitably. We can call this ‘the Indubitability Assumption’. The Indubitability Assumption immediately restricts the range of objects with which a thinker may be acquainted.”¹⁰ A. J. Ayer explains that, on Russell’s account of acquaintance, “when an object is known by acquaintance, its existence is not open to doubt; but the existence of objects which are known only by description is problematic.”¹¹ Ayer claims that Russell “took it to follow from the fact that one was acquainted with a particular object, both that the object really existed and that it had the properties which it appeared to have.” Yet, Russell’s inclusion of the notion of completeness in his account of acquaintance results in a third entailment not mentioned by Ayer, namely, that the object of acquaintance have *only* the properties that it appears to have.

Some philosophers have questioned whether Russell held that acquaintance entails indubitability, or whether the Indubitability Assumption is an essential element in Russell’s notion of acquaintance. Interpreting rather than reconstructing Russell, Sainsbury suggests that it is possible that Russell “did not believe that indubitability is constitutive of the nature of acquaintance. The indubitability of sense data are due to special features of these objects, rather than to the mere fact that we are acquainted with them.”¹² But Sainsbury is surely mistaken about indubitability not being constitutive of Russellian acquaintance. The fact that there is room for doubt concerning propositions that arise from acquaintance with certain facts does not entail that the doubt concerns the existence of those facts themselves. We may suspect that we have mis-analyzed a complex fact, incorrectly separating out its constitutive elements and generating a false proposition, without ever entertaining a doubt about the existence of the fact

¹⁰ *Sense and Content*, p. 199.

¹¹ “An Appraisal of Bertrand Russell’s Philosophy”, in *Bertrand Russell*, ed. Pears, p.

14.
¹² “Russell on Acquaintance”, p. 221.

with which we are acquainted.

On Russell’s analysis, the objects of acquaintance are known by us completely and perfectly, with no further knowledge of them even theoretically possible. If we know all there is to know of *O* when we are acquainted with *O*, then surely one of the things that we know is whether doubt about *O*, such as doubt about *O*’s existence, is warranted. It is not as clear as Sainsbury suggests that Russell would deny the indubitability of “our knowledge of the existence of a fact with which we are acquainted” (p. 222). There is good reason to believe that the indubitability of acquaintance follows from Russell’s views about the completeness and perfection of acquaintance. Consequently, it is far from obvious that indubitability forms a dispensable part of Russell’s account of acquaintance.

The indubitability of knowledge by acquaintance follows from its infallibility since we cannot doubt what cannot theoretically fail to be knowledge. The infallibility of knowledge by acquaintance follows from the completeness and perfection of the knowledge, with no further knowledge of the object known by acquaintance even theoretically possible. Given the completeness and perfection of knowledge by acquaintance, we can hardly dispense with its indubitability.

Russell himself makes the indubitability point in terms of absurdities. He states 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” (*PP*, p. 26). The clear suggestion here is that any doubt about the reality and existence of sense-data with which we are acquainted would be absurd. Where the object of acquaintance is real but does not actually exist, such as in the case of acquaintance with universal properties and relations, any doubt about the reality, but not the existence, of the universals with which we are acquainted would similarly be absurd.

RUSSELL’S NOTION OF LEARNING TO BE ACQUAINTED

Russell’s paradigm case of knowledge of a universal property or relation involves abstracting the universal from a collection of items by recognizing something that those items share in common. Russell explains that, “When we see a white patch, we are acquainted, in the first instance, with the particular patch; but by seeing many white

patches, we easily learn to abstract the whiteness which they all have in common, and in learning to do this we are learning to be acquainted with whiteness" (*PP*, p. 58). Russell's talk of "learning to be acquainted with whiteness" is confusing since he has led us to believe that we either are or are not acquainted with something, and that it is not a matter of degree. This was surely part of the point of the completeness and perfection of acquaintance. If we must "learn to be acquainted with whiteness", then it is clear that we did not learn everything there is to learn of whiteness when we were first presented with it. Any knowledge that can stand improvement through further learning is clearly not a form of knowledge that is complete, perfect and infallible, with no further knowledge even theoretically possible.

But it is important not to overlook Russell's notion of learning to be acquainted. Russell seems to be saying that, although we achieve full acquaintance with individual particulars that exemplify the universal property of whiteness whenever we are acquainted with white sense-data, we do not yet achieve full acquaintance with all of their relations to other particulars with which we are acquainted. Only by recognizing that several of the particulars with which we are acquainted share the common universal property of whiteness do we become fully acquainted with this objective relation that obtains between these particulars. Only by learning to recognize this objective relation between these particulars are we able to learn to be acquainted with the universal property of whiteness.

Alan R. White maintains that Russell "took 'acquaintance' to signify an occurrence, a momentary present contact, whereas ordinary 'acquaintance' is used dispositionally."¹³ Romane Clark similarly insists that "an act of acquaintance just is a single occurrent awareness."¹⁴ But White's and Clark's claims conflict with Russell's account of acquaintance with universal properties and relations. When we abstract a universal from several complexes that we have noticed share a common element, thereby learning to be acquainted with the

¹³ "Knowledge, Acquaintance, and Awareness", in *The Foundations of Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr. and Howard K. Wettstein (Midwest Studies in Philosophy, Vol. 6) (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota P., 1981), p. 160.

¹⁴ "Acquaintance", *Synthese*, 46 (1981): 232-3.

universal itself, Russell does not suggest that this acquaintance that we learn to achieve is merely an occurrence, rather than a lasting cognition or direct awareness of the universal. Russell's account of acquaintance with the universal relations of mathematics shows clearly that he did not mean to suggest that, as soon as the universal that we have abstracted is no longer "before our mind", such as when our mind wanders onto other matters, we lose our acquaintance with it, and must re-learn to be acquainted with it by re-abstracting the universal from another collection of complexes that have that universal in common.

COULD SELF-KNOWLEDGE EVER BE ACQUAINTANCE WITH THE SELF?

Russell's answer to the question: What do we know when we know we perceive? changes over the years as he grows progressively more suspicious of knowledge of the self. In *The Problems of Philosophy*, he states that "it is probable, though not certain, that we have acquaintance with Self, as that which is aware of things or has desires towards things" (p. 28). But in *Theory of Knowledge*, Russell explicitly denies that we are ever acquainted with the self. He claims that the theory of acquaintance would be false if it implied "a direct consciousness of the bare subject" (p. 37). Russell concludes that "we are not acquainted with the subject" (p. 40) and that "The subject itself appears to be not acquainted with itself" (p. 44). When we are aware of our experiencing of an object *O*, what we are actually aware of is the *fact* "something is acquainted with *O*" (p. 37). The subject appears, not in any individual capacity, but rather "as an 'apparent variable'". Subjects of experiences are not themselves given in acquaintance, but are instead "known merely as referents for the relation of acquaintance" (*ibid.*).

Russell cautions that "nothing is to be assumed as to the identity of the subjects of different experiences belonging to the same person" (p. 35) because it is always possible that the one self or mind that embraces both subjects is a mere construction (pp. 38-9). Russell's account of "self-consciousness", or the "experience of a present experience", is thus *doubly ironic* since it requires neither an identity of the subjects of the two experiences nor a consciousness or awareness of the self. Yet, how could it be *our* experiencing that we introspectively

experience if it is *not* the same subject in both the introspected experience and the introspecting experience? How could the different experiences belong to the same person if the subjects of those experiences differed?

On Russell's analysis, we are not directly or immediately aware of ourselves when we are aware of seeing the sun, but are instead directly or immediately aware of a complex that is our seeing the sun. Exactly how we know that it is *our* seeing the sun that we are introspecting when we are *not* directly aware of the subject of the seeing remains a mystery. When Russell allows that "acquaintance with ourselves seems *probably* to occur", it is easier to understand how we could know it is *our* seeing that we are introspecting, and not someone else's. But when he later *suggests* that "we assume that we do not have acquaintance with ourselves",¹⁵ it is more difficult to see how we could possibly know that it is *our* seeing that we introspect.

Just as acquaintance with an introspected experience does not entail acquaintance with the subject of that experience, Russell believes that "acquaintance with a complex does not necessarily involve acquaintance with its relating relation" (*TK*, p. 82). The complex may be given to us in acquaintance *as a whole*, rather than "experienced in the analyzed form". However, this allows for the implausible situation in which, prior to acquiring "that more abstract acquaintance" that enables us to understand the word "seeing", we introspectively experience our seeing the sun, the *fact* that we are seeing the sun, without ever being acquainted with either ourselves or the seeing. Since Russell maintains that the sun itself is a mere theoretical or logical construction, not much seems to remain as the object of introspective acquaintance when we are introspectively aware of our seeing the sun. If we introspectively experience the *fact* that we are seeing, without ever experiencing the seeing itself, then how do we know *that* it is a fact that we are seeing? How do we know *that* the fact which we introspect *is* a fact?

Russell never appreciated the difficulties in his view that "two experiences can be seen to have a certain resemblance which in fact

¹⁵ "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description", p. 199; *Papers* 6: 149.

consists in their having the same subject, even if the subject itself is not given in acquaintance. (I am not asserting that this *is* the case, but only that it may be.)" (p. 83). He apparently reasoned that the datum of awareness in our awareness of an experience is a *fact*, and that we can see the resemblance between two facts without having to see the resemblance between the particulars about which they are facts. Just as we can be aware of the *fact* "something is acquainted with *O*" without ever being acquainted with that something, we can be aware of the resemblance between the *facts* "*A* experiences *X*" and "*A* experiences *Y*" without ever being acquainted with *A*.

But how can two experiences be seen to have a certain resemblance that in fact consists in their having a common subject without our being acquainted with that in virtue of which they have that resemblance, namely, the subject of the experiences? If it is suggested that the two experiences can be seen to have the property of belonging to the same subject, the question then becomes: How can the experiences be seen to have the property of belonging to the same subject if we are never actually acquainted with that in virtue of which they have the property? How can it be seen *to be* a fact that the experiences have the property of belonging to the same subject? In order to know an experience has the property of being ours, we must know the experience is ours. But how do we know an experience is ours if we are never acquainted with ourselves?

Certainly, on Russell's own account of learning to be acquainted, seeing that two experiences have a certain resemblance suggests that we have abstracted, and thereby learned to be acquainted with, that in virtue of which they have this resemblance. If the resemblance in fact consists in the experiences having the same subject, then seeing that the experiences have a certain resemblance suggests that we have successfully abstracted, and thus learned to be acquainted with, the common subject of those experiences. It might be suggested that we merely abstract the *fact* that the experiences share a common subject, that we abstract their sharing a common subject, without ever having to abstract a common subject. But since sharing a common subject is a property of two or more experiences, rather than a property possessed by individual experiences, it is not a property that two experiences can have in common, and so cannot be abstracted from the experiences. The fact that two experiences share a common subject does not entail

that they share the having of a common subject.

At the very least, Russell grossly underrepresented our self-awareness or self-consciousness when he insisted that "the datum when we are aware of experiencing an object *O* is the fact 'something is acquainted with *O*'" (*TK*, p. 37). When we are aware of our seeing the sun, and thus, on Russell's analysis, acquainted with our acquaintance with a sense-datum representing the sun, we are directly aware, not just that *something* sees the sun, but also that *we* see the sun. We are immediately aware, not just of *a* seeing of the sun, but also of *our* seeing of the sun.

ABSTRACTIONISM AND ACQUAINTANCE WITH THE SELF

While Russell is right to reject the assumption "that we are ever acquainted with the bare subject of an acquaintance" (*ibid.*), it remains unclear how "two instances of acquaintance can be given as having a common subject, even when the subject is not given." But if we apply Russell's abstractionist reasoning about universals to the problem of acquaintance with the self, we arrive at a model of knowledge of the self that does not require acquaintance with a bare self. From acquaintance with a complex that has whiteness as a constituent, we become acquainted, through abstraction, with the universal property of whiteness itself. We are never actually acquainted with the universal property of whiteness on its own, as a bare universal.

Why not apply the same sort of analysis to the problem of acquaintance with the self? Why not suppose that, in the first instance, we are introspectively acquainted only with mental complexes of which we are a constituent, but after several such introspections, we learn to abstract the common element from those complexes, and thereby learn to be acquainted with ourselves? In this way, we avoid having to say that we have merely descriptive, and thus fallible, knowledge of ourselves. We also manage to avoid the Humean difficulty of having to say that we become acquainted with ourselves by catching a glimpse of ourselves as a naked or bare particular, outside of all mental complexes. We become directly acquainted with ourselves through being acquainted with complexes of which we are a constituent, and recognizing that we are the common element in all of those complexes. What we recognize as being common to those complexes *just is* our-

selves, and not that they all have the property of being ours.

Russell's analysis of acquaintance with universals, involving the notion of learning to be acquainted, thus serves as a possible model for acquaintance with ourselves. This model takes account of the Humean objection that, whenever we look inside ourselves, we never can see a bare self, but instead see certain thoughts and experiences. The merit of this model is that it stops short of denying, as both Hume and Russell felt compelled to deny, that we are ever directly acquainted with the self. As a result, it provides a more plausible answer to the questions: How do we know our experiences are ours? and What do we know when we know we perceive?

Just as we can learn, through the process of abstraction, to be introspectively acquainted with the universals that are instantiated in our mental complexes, we can learn to be introspectively acquainted with ourselves through the process of abstracting the common element from our mental complexes. Our acquaintance, in the first instance, is with mental complexes of which we are constituents. But by introspecting several of these complexes, we learn to abstract their common element, and to obtain self-awareness.

We can agree with Russell when he remarks that "it is hard to discover any state of mind in which I am aware of myself alone, as opposed to a complex of which I am a constituent."¹⁶ On the proposed account of self-knowledge through introspective acquaintance, we are not aware of, or acquainted with, the self alone, a bare particular wholly outside of any complex whatsoever. But this does not mean that we are never actually acquainted with the self. As Roderick Chisholm rightly points out: "from the fact that there is no 'direct consciousness of a bare subject' we must not draw the erroneous conclusion that no one is ever directly acquainted with himself."¹⁷ Instead, we learn to be acquainted with the self through being acquainted in introspection with mental complexes that have the self as a constituent.

¹⁶ "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description", p. 199; *Papers* 6: 149.

¹⁷ "On the Nature of Acquaintance: a Discussion of Russell's Theory of Knowledge", in *Bertrand Russell's Philosophy*, ed. George Nakhnikian (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1974), p. 52.

We recognize that the introspected self is one and the same self as the introspecting self since, in learning to be acquainted with the introspected self, we acquire complete, perfect and infallible knowledge of that self. If our knowledge of the introspected self is so complete and perfect that no further knowledge of it is even theoretically possible, then we will surely know, among other things, whether we are warranted in doubting whether the introspected self is one and the same self as the introspecting self.

Russell hints at the immunity from error in self-reference when, in commenting on cases of acquaintance in which what we are acquainted with is itself an acquaintance with an object, such as when "I am acquainted with my acquaintance with the sense-datum representing the sun", he claims that "it is plain that the person acquainted is myself" (*PP*, pp. 27–8). It is difficult to see how the fact that it is one's *own* self who is acquainted with the sense-datum can be so plain unless it were supposed that the self involved in the complex were *itself* an object of acquaintance.

Surely the most plausible answer to the question: What do we know when we know we perceive? is in terms of acquaintance with the perceiving self. Through introspection, we are able to recognize the common element in our mental states, including our perceptions, and to abstract this common element from these mental complexes. By abstracting this common element, or self, we learn to be acquainted with the self. Since Russellian acquaintance gives complete and perfect knowledge of its objects, with no further knowledge even theoretically possible, we also acquire infallible and indubitable knowledge of the identity of the abstracted self. For among the things that we must surely learn when we learn to be acquainted with the abstracted self is whether we are warranted in doubting whether the abstracted self is one and the same self as the abstracting self. We do not catch glimpses of bare selves, but instead abstract ourselves from our various mental states. It is only by abstracting ourselves from our mental complexes that we are able to learn to be acquainted with ourselves.¹⁸

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