

AN ACQUAINTANCE ALTERNATIVE TO SELF-REPRESENTATIONALISM

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Abstract. The primary goal of this paper is to provide substantial motivation for exploring an Acquaintance account of phenomenal consciousness, on which what fundamentally explains phenomenal consciousness is the relation of *acquaintance*. Its secondary goal is to take a few steps towards such an account. Roughly, my argument proceeds as follows. Motivated by prioritizing naturalization, the debate about the nature of phenomenal consciousness has been almost monopolized by representational theories (first-order and meta-representational). Among them, Self-Representationalism is by far the most antecedently promising (or so I argue). However, on thorough inspection, Self-Representationalism turns out not explanatorily or theoretically better than the Acquaintance account. Indeed, the latter seems to be superior in at least some important respects. Therefore, at the very least, there are good reasons to take the Acquaintance account into serious consideration as an alternative to representational theories. The positive contribution of this paper is a sketch of an account of consciousness on which phenomenal consciousness is explained partly in representationalist terms, but where a crucial role is played by the relation of acquaintance.

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This paper is about *phenomenal consciousness*, that is, the subjective and qualitative aspect of experience. Its primary goal is to provide substantial motivation for exploring an Acquaintance account of phenomenal consciousness. Its secondary goal is to take a few steps towards such an account. Roughly, on the Acquaintance account, what makes a mental state conscious is its subject's being *acquainted* with it, where acquaintance is understood as a metaphysically and epistemically direct mental relation. (More details will be provided in due time.) My argument proceeds as follows. Motivated by prioritizing naturalization, the debate about the nature of phenomenal consciousness has mostly revolved around representational theories (first-order and meta-representational). Among them, Self-Representationalism is by far the most antecedently promising (or so I argue). However, on thorough inspection, Self-Representationalism turns out not explanatorily or theoretically better than the Acquaintance account. Indeed, the latter seems to be superior at least in some important respects. Therefore, at the very least, there are good reasons to take the Acquaintance account into serious consideration as an alternative to representational theories.

More specifically, here is how I proceed. First, I briefly review what I take to be the major shortcomings of First-Order Representationalism and Higher-Order Representationalism (§1). My aim here is *not* to *argue* against those views. Rather, my critical review is aimed at distilling some *desiderata* that I consider indispensable for a theory of phenomenal consciousness. Among

representational views, only Self-Representationalism promises to satisfy all those desiderata, and this contributes to making it the most antecedently promising representational theory of phenomenal consciousness. In §2, I provide an overview of Self-Representationalism; I focus on Uriah Kriegel's (2009) version of it, which is the most carefully and thoroughly developed. In §3, I run a critical analysis of Kriegel's theory. I present four objections against it which, though not fatal, may shake our credence in it. In §4, I offer a sketch of an Acquaintance account of phenomenal consciousness, one on which phenomenal consciousness is explained only *partly* in representational terms and where a crucial role is played by the relation of acquaintance. I show that, while satisfying all the key desiderata, the Acquaintance account does not face the problems for Self-Representationalism highlighted in §3. On the face of it, it appears theoretically more virtuous than Self-Representationalism. Self-representationalists, however, disagree. They claim the superiority of their view based on considerations of *familiarity* and *uniqueness*. The idea is that, whereas representation is a familiar notion, acquaintance is unfamiliar, unique of its kind, and thereby suspicious. In §5, I argue that Self-Representationalism's advantage in this respect is only apparent, for the special kind of representation that is required for a satisfactory Self-Representationalist account of consciousness is in fact no less unfamiliar or unique than the relation of acquaintance. The Acquaintance account is thus *on a par* with Self-Representationalism in these respects. Since, as I show in §4, the Acquaintance account satisfies all desiderata without incurring Self-Representationalism's difficulties, there are indeed good reasons to take it to be superior. At the very least, it should be considered as a serious alternative to representationalist theories of phenomenal consciousness.¹

1. Phenomenal consciousness, representationalism and desiderata

The purpose of this section is to (i) give a sense of why and on what assumptions Self-Representationalism is the most promising representational theory of consciousness, and (ii) draw a list of desiderata that I take to be ineliminable for the evaluation of any theory of consciousness. More specifically, I proceed as follows. I briefly present the main representationalist theories of phenomenal consciousness (other than Self-Representationalism). My goal here is *not to argue* against them. Rather, by running a critical review of them, I distill a list of *desiderata* that I consider indispensable for any theory of phenomenal consciousness and show that those theories do not satisfy them. I will not argue for the desiderata either—though I will try to elicit intuitions as to their attractiveness. After all, arguably, the evaluation of any theory of consciousness will be partly based on bedrock intuitions about desiderata and depend, to a certain extent, on what the theorist considers as the most pressing

¹ An argumentative strategy that is in some respects structurally similar to the one proposed here is put forward by Ken Williford (2015). He highlights some shortcomings of First-Order Representationalism and Higher-Order Representationalism, suggests that Self-Representationalism is the most promising representational theory of consciousness, points at some weaknesses of Self-Representationalism, and argues that the only plausible version of it collapses into an Acquaintance theory of consciousness. The details of the argument, however, are quite different from what I articulate in this paper (e.g., drawing a list of desiderata, focusing on the mysteriousness/unfamiliarity objection to the Acquaintance account, etc.). Also, the objections to Self-Representationalism put forward here are (at least partly) distinct from those articulated by Williford.

aspects to account for—or so it seems to me. Accordingly, my final claim will be conditional: if you agree on the core desiderata, then the Acquaintance account is at least worth exploring and indeed very promising.

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When I fill my mouth with ripe strawberries, there is a strawberry-ish way it is like for me to have that conscious taste experience. When I plunge my bare hand into a snow drift and feel its coldness, there is a freezing-ish way it is like for me to have that experience. When I am in a depressive mood, there is a pointless-ish way it is like for me to be in it. Each of these is a phenomenally conscious experience and the way it is like for me to be in each of them is the experience's phenomenal character. Two aspects can be distinguished in the phenomenal character: the “something it is like” aspect (*strawberry-ish, freezing-ish, pointless-ish*) and the “for me” aspect. Following Uriah Kriegel (2009: 1), I call the former *qualitative character* and the latter *subjective character*. Joe Levine effectively introduces this distinction thus:

Not only is it a matter of some state (my experience) having some feature (being reddish) but, being an experience, its being reddish is “for me,” a way it's like *for me*, in a way that being red is like nothing for—in fact is not in any way “for”—my diskette case. Let's call this the *subjectivity* of conscious experience. Nagel (1974) himself emphasized this feature by noting that conscious experience involves our having a “point of view.” (2001: 6-7)²

A theory of phenomenal consciousness is a theory that aims to explain in virtue of what a mental state is phenomenally conscious. Arguably, it should include an account of both qualitative and subjective character.

Throughout the past forty years or so, representational theories have gained increasing prominence in the debate about the nature of phenomenal consciousness. Motivated by the promise of naturalization, and relying on the idea that the notion of representation can be wholly explained in physical terms, representational theories aim to reduce phenomenal consciousness to some kind of representation. Representational theories come in two main kinds: First-Order Representationalism and Meta-Representationalism; the latter includes Higher-Order Representationalism and Self-Representationalism.

First-Order Representationalism (FOR) is the view that phenomenal consciousness reduces to first-order representation (Dretske 1995; Tye 1995):

FOR: For any conscious mental state M, M is conscious in virtue of representing something (in the right way).³

On FOR, M has its *qualitative character* in virtue of representing something (in the right kind of way) and the qualitative character exhausts M's phenomenal character—M's phenomenology is fully determined by its qualitative character. On this view, then, when you put a strawberry in your mouth,

² Arguably, what Levine calls “subjectivity” is very similar to what I call “subjective character.”

³ What it takes for a mental state to represent something “in the right way” varies depending on the specific theory. I leave this aside for it is irrelevant to my present purposes.

what makes your strawberry taste experience conscious is its (suitably) representing (the right properties of) strawberries. In virtue of so representing, there is a strawberry-ish way it is like to have that experience (its qualitative character) and this is all there is to your experience's phenomenal character.

A large variety of objections have been raised against FOR but reviewing them falls out of the scope of this paper.⁴ What is relevant to our present purpose is that FOR only provides an account of *qualitative* character: it does not even *attempt* to offer an account of *subjective* character. Arguably, this is partly due to the fact that first-order representationalists do not think that a theory of consciousness requires an account of subjective character—either because they believe that there is no such thing as subjective character, or because they believe that even if there is, it is not an essential aspect of consciousness.⁵

For those who disagree with first-order representationalists in this respect—and (like me) believe that subjective character is an essential aspect of experience and that a theory of phenomenal consciousness must account for it—FOR is unsatisfactory. Accordingly, here is our first *desideratum*:

Subjective Character Desideratum: A theory of phenomenal consciousness must account not only for qualitative character but also for subjective character.

Endorsing the *Subjective Character Desideratum* implies acknowledging that a good theory of consciousness ought to number subjective character among its *explananda*. The intuition that motivates this desideratum is that consciousness involves a “point of view”—the *subjective* point of view: the subjective perspective is an essential aspect of consciousness and perhaps what most fundamentally defines it. Within the immense phenomenal variety that typically characterizes our stream of consciousness, there is an aspect that seems to be shared by all phenomenally conscious experiences: their being *for me* (for the subject)—their being experienced *by a subject*. To be clear, the *Subjective Character Desideratum* implies neither a thick metaphysical notion of subject, nor an “inflationary” view

⁴ Arguably, the two most serious objections concern, respectively (i) unconscious representations: things in our environment can be represented unconsciously, as, e.g., in subliminal perception; thus, something more than mere first-order representation is required for consciousness (Sturgeon 2000; Kriegel 2002; Chalmers 2004) and (ii) experiences whose phenomenology does not seem to reduce to representational content—e.g. sensations such as pains and tickles, emotions, and especially moods (Block 1995a, 1995b; Kind 2014; Bordini 2017).

⁵ An anonymous referee suggested that a first-order representationalist *could* account for subjective character by positing a *first-order self-representation*, i.e., a first-order representation of the self as subject. However, arguably, it is unlikely that first-order representationalists would accept the existence of such a representation. For first-order representationalism is typically motivated by *transparency* considerations: when we have a conscious experience, they argue, all we are aware of are (features of) mind-independent objects. Arguably, a representation of the self as subject does *not* amount to awareness of a *mind-independent* object. Therefore, allowing for such a representation would violate the transparency thesis which constitutes the main phenomenological motivation of first-order representationalism. Moreover, even if first-order representationalists did allow for first-order representation of the self as subject, such a representation would not be sufficient to explain subjective character. For subjective character is the aspect of phenomenal character in virtue of which there is something it is like for the subject *to have a certain experience*. So, arguably, if subjective character is to be explained in representationalist terms, the relevant representation needs to be (at least partly) representation of a particular experience (thus a meta-representation).

about the phenomenology of the self, nor a strong anti-Humean epistemological claim about its introspective accessibility (though of course each of these stronger claims may *accompany* the desideratum). For a fuller defense of the *Subjective Character Desideratum* see e.g. Levine (2001), Kriegel (2003, 2009), Zahavi (2005, 2014); Zahavi and Kriegel (2015).

Accounting for subjective character implies acknowledging that conscious mental states are not merely *in* us, but somehow *given to* us. Plausibly, this entails that mental states of which the subject is completely unaware cannot be conscious. Cellular respiration, hormone secretion by the endocrine system, and electrical or chemical signal transmission through a synapse are all processes that occur in us, but of which we are unaware. Subliminal perceptual representation also occurs in us without us being aware of it: it is *unconscious* representation. By contrast, *conscious* mental states and processes are states and processes we are *aware* of. Therefore, accounting for subjective character implies acknowledging that conscious states are states of which the subject is aware. This takes us straight to our second desideratum:

Transitivity Desideratum: A theory of phenomenal consciousness must imply that conscious states are mental states of which the subject is aware.

We may call the relevant awareness of one's own mental states "inner awareness."

Of course, the *Transitivity Desideratum* has its detractors—especially among first-order representationalists (see esp. Dretske 1993). However, those who are *not* antecedently attracted to First-Order Representationalism usually find it plausible. Moreover, the desideratum has been a central tenet of most theories of consciousness throughout the history of philosophy (from Aristotle, through Descartes and Locke, to Brentano and the phenomenological tradition) and has received renewed defense in recent analytic philosophy (for a summary of the arguments for the *Transitivity Desideratum*, and replies to objections, see Weisberg 2020: 439-442).

Meta-representational theories of consciousness (MR) have the *Transitivity Desideratum* at the core of their explanation of phenomenal consciousness. By spelling out inner awareness in terms of representation, they share the following central claim:

MR: For any conscious mental state M , M is phenomenally conscious in virtue of being suitably represented by some mental state M^* .

MR comes in two versions—Higher-Order Representationalism and Self-Representationalism—depending on whether M and M^* are distinct states or the same state. Higher-Order Representationalism (HOR) is the view that phenomenal consciousness requires higher-order representation (Armstrong 1968; Lycan 1996; Rosenthal 1997):

HOR: For any conscious mental state M , M is phenomenally conscious in virtue of being suitably represented by some mental state M^* , and $M \neq M^*$.

HOR satisfies both the *Subjective Character Desideratum* and the *Transitivity Desideratum*. However, it faces a number of difficulties. Again, I am not going to review them all—I just point at those that strike me as the most serious, my primary aim being drawing two further desiderata.

The main problem with HOR is metaphysical; it concerns the possibility of *targetless* or *misrepresenting* higher-order states. Here is the intuition on which the problem hinges. In perceptual experience (“outer” awareness), there is the possibility of hallucination or illusion: it might perceptually appear to you that there is some object *o* with property *P* in your surroundings (e.g. you have a visual experience as of a pink elephant) in the absence of any such object (no elephant is around you)—this is the *hallucination* case (your perceptual state is *targetless*); or *o* might appear to you to be *P* while in fact being *not P* (there is an elephant before you but it is brown, not pink)—this is the *illusion* case (your perceptual state *misrepresents o*). However, when it comes to “inner” awareness of our own conscious experiences, analogous hallucinatory or illusory cases seem to be impossible. It seems that, necessarily, if an experience phenomenally appears to you, it cannot be the case that *no experience* is present (it cannot be the case that you feel a tickle sensation in your armpit in the absence of any experience); and that if an experience phenomenally appears to you to have phenomenal property *P*, it cannot be the case that your experience is *not P* (it cannot be the case that what you feel is a ticklish sensation but the experience you really have is a pain sensation).⁶ In other words, there is *no appearance/reality* gap when it comes to conscious experience: it (phenomenally) *is* exactly how it (phenomenally) *appears* to be. This is sometimes spelled out in terms of *intimacy* (Weisberg 2008; Kriegel 2009: 107-8): there is a specially intimate relationship between the subject and their experiences, one that makes inner awareness fundamentally different from outer awareness.

To be clear, the *no appearance/reality gap* claim does *not* imply a claim about *introspective infallibility*. The special intimacy invoked by the claim concerns the relationship between the *phenomenal* appearance of a conscious state and its reality. This is consistent with there being a gap between the conscious state’s *epistemic* appearance and its reality.⁷ In other words, the intimacy claim is consistent with our *judgments* about our conscious states being mistaken (you may introspectively *judge* that you have a tickle sensation in your armpit while what you really have is a pain sensation). Therefore, the intimacy claim should be distinguished from the introspective infallibility claim (i.e., the claim that, necessarily, all our judgments about our own mental states are true).⁸

Besides being phenomenologically compelling (McClelland 2020: 464), the intimacy claim—in its “modest” (non-introspective-infallibility-implying) form specified in the previous paragraph—is widely accepted and has been advocated by several theorists, among whom Byrne (1997), Neander (1998), Levine (2001, 2018), Gennaro (2006), Hellie (2007), Kriegel (2009), Kidd (2011), and Coleman (2015).

Now, the problem with HOR is that the way it construes the subject’s awareness of their experience—i.e., in terms of a distinct mental state that represents it—does allow for an appearance/reality gap in conscious experience. As there can be targetless or misrepresenting perceptual states, there can be targetless or misrepresenting higher-order states. So, on HOR, it is

⁶ Though, of course, it is possible that you form the *belief* that your experience is *P* while your experience is not *P*. I will come back to this in a moment.

⁷ On phenomenal vs. epistemic appearance see Chisholm (1957) and Jackson (1977).

⁸ The same point is made by McClelland (2020: 463, fn. 8).

possible for a subject to be in a higher-order state M^* and thereby *seem* to have a conscious state M with phenomenal property P , even in the absence of M (or of any first-order state), or even though M is not P .

To be sure, not all theorists believe that the pull of the no-appearance/reality gap intuition should turn into a desideratum for a theory of phenomenal consciousness.⁹ Arguably, debate on this point ultimately divides up into clashing bedrock intuitions, and no no-question-begging argument can support one side or the other. However, as noted, the intimacy claim is quite widespread. At any rate, those who do think that the no-appearance/reality gap intuition should be accommodated will endorse my third desideratum:

Intimacy Desideratum. A theory of phenomenal consciousness must imply that there is no appearance/reality gap in conscious experience.¹⁰

The second difficulty for HOR is phenomenological; it is related to its stipulating that higher-order states are *unconscious*—the theory needs this to avoid the threat of vicious infinite regress.¹¹ Higher-order representation is meant to account for subjective character—via the *Transitivity* principle: an experience has subjective character in virtue of the subject’s being aware of it. On HOR, such inner awareness is accounted for by unconscious higher-order representation. Now, subjective character is part of the experience’s phenomenal character; as such, it is *phenomenologically manifest*. However, unconscious representation is *not* phenomenologically manifest. HOR thus fails to do justice to the phenomenology of consciousness in that it does not capture the fact that the “for me” aspect of experience is a *phenomenal* aspect—it is part of the phenomenal character (Kriegel 2009: 116).¹² From HOR’s failure, we draw our fourth and last desideratum (recall, “inner awareness” is the subject’s

⁹ David Rosenthal (2005: 172), for example, appeals to cases in which dental patients mistake a vibration sensation for a pain sensation to argue in favor of an appearance-reality gap. Other authors who explicitly reject the no-appearance/reality gap intuition include Brown (2010), Churchland (2013), Hill (2016), and Schwitzgebel (2011). So-called *illusionists* maintain that an appearance/reality gap in conscious experience is not only possible but also ubiquitous: *all* conscious experiences, they claim, are a sort of “inner hallucination” (Dennett 1988, 2016; Frankish 2016; Kammerer 2016).

¹⁰ HOR-theorists may try to satisfy the *Intimacy Desideratum* by adding to their theory the extra claim that higher-order representations are *infallible*, in the sense that they cannot mischaracterize or mistarget their first-order representation. However, this move would be *ad hoc* and unexplanatory (the alleged infallibility would be just a brute fact). Alternatively, they may appeal to a *constitutive* connection between the higher-order and the first-order representation. The latter move would be akin to Kriegel’s own solution to the intimacy problem (see §2). Since, as I will show, Self-Representationalism is superior to HOR in other respects, HOR’s appeal to constitutive connection would make it neither better nor equal to Self-Representationalism. Moreover, Tom McClelland (2020: 464) argues that the constitutive-connection solution to the intimacy problem jeopardizes HOR’s satisfaction of the *Transitivity Desideratum*.

¹¹ If the higher-order state were conscious, there would need to be a third-order mental state to represent it and thereby make it conscious. This kind of case is not excluded by the theory—Rosenthal (1986) argues that this is exactly what happens when we introspect. However, to avoid infinite regress, the theory needs that the representation chain end with an unconscious n -order representation and the most parsimonious way to do it is to stipulate that it is the *second*-order representation that constitutes the last link of the chain and is thus unconscious (except for introspective cases, where the last link is the third-order representation).

¹² Kriegel also develops a separate thorough argument, hinging on epistemic considerations, to the effect that the higher-order representation must be conscious (2009: 115-124).

awareness of their experience; this is what, on the *Transitivity Desideratum*, accounts for subjective character):

Inner Awareness Desideratum: A theory of phenomenal consciousness must imply that inner awareness is phenomenologically manifest.

Again, this may be controversial.¹³ I note, however, that those who are pre-theoretically attracted to the *Subjective Character Desideratum* and to the *Transitivity Desideratum* should also be attracted to the *Inner Awareness Desideratum*. Once we acknowledge that the subjective character exists, we should also acknowledge that it is phenomenologically manifest (for the reasons cited in the previous paragraph). If what accounts for subjective character is inner awareness, then the theory must imply that inner awareness is phenomenologically manifest.

Taking stock. For those who endorse my theoretical commitments about phenomenal consciousness, a satisfactory theory of phenomenal consciousness must accommodate at least four desiderata: *Subjective Character*, *Transitivity*, *Intimacy*, and *Inner Awareness*.¹⁴ Neither FOR nor HOR satisfies them all. Self-Representationalism promises to be the only representational theory capable of satisfying all four desiderata. The next section is devoted to illustrating how.

2. (The best version of) Self-Representationalism

In this section, I summarize the main tenets of Self-Representationalism. Here and throughout, I refer to Uriah Kriegel's (2009) theory, which is by far the most carefully and thoroughly developed version of Self-Representationalism. I illustrate his theory in broad strokes, leaving out many details and focusing on what is relevant for its evaluation in the context of comparing it with an Acquaintance alternative.

As noted, Self-Representationalism (SR) is a form of meta-representationalism, where the first-order representational state and the meta-representational state are the same state:

SR: For any conscious mental state M , M is phenomenally conscious in virtue of being suitably represented by some mental state M^* , and $M = M^*$.

Kriegel preliminarily announces an account of qualitative character in terms of first-order representation and an account of subjective character in terms of self-representation (2009: 12-16):

SR (*Qualitative Character*): For any conscious mental state M , M has qualitative character iff it represents something (in the right way).

¹³ Levine (2015), for example, seems to maintain that what he calls "subjectivity" is *not* phenomenologically manifest. However, he seems to have in mind a rather "thick" notion of self-awareness—where subjective character being phenomenologically manifest implies the subject's appearing among the contents of awareness—while only a thinner notion of phenomenological manifestness of subjectivity is assumed here.

¹⁴ I do not intend this list to be exhaustive. Rather, my claim is that a theory of phenomenal consciousness must satisfy *at least* these desiderata.

SR (Subjective Character): For any conscious mental state M, M has subjective character iff it (suitably) represents itself.

On Kriegel's view, the "right kind" of first-order representation involved in qualitative character is representation of *response-dependent properties* (2009: 87-98). This, however, is not crucial for the present purpose. What is relevant here is that the kind of representation involved in qualitative character can be explained in *causal* terms and therefore promises naturalization. As for subjective character, I will come back to what "suitable" self-representation amounts to in a moment.

Self-Representationalism satisfies straightforwardly three out of our four desiderata. It takes subjective character seriously and provides a thorough account of it (*Subjective Character Desideratum*). The idea is, roughly, that a conscious state M of a subject S has subjective character in virtue S's being aware of M and S is aware of M in virtue of M's (suitably) representing itself.¹⁵ By being a version of meta-representationalism, it satisfies the *Transitivity Desideratum*. It explains consciousness in terms of a mental state representing itself; by harboring a mental state that (suitably) self-represents, a subject becomes aware of that mental state. Therefore, Self-Representationalism implies that conscious states are mental states of which the subject is aware. Finally, by construing meta-representation as self-representation, the theory avoids the phenomenologically implausible claim that the meta-representational state is unconscious and thereby satisfies the *Inner Awareness Desideratum*. Since, on Self-Representationalism, the meta-representational state coincides with the first-order conscious state, the meta-representational state is itself conscious and thereby phenomenologically manifest. By accounting for inner awareness in terms of conscious meta-representation, therefore, Self-Representationalism implies that inner awareness is phenomenologically manifest.¹⁶

To see how Self-Representationalism promises to satisfy the *Intimacy Desideratum* too, some further specifications are needed. Since the notion of representation seems to imply the possibility of misrepresentation, it is not immediately clear that Self-Representationalism fares better than HOR with respect to intimacy: at least *prima facie*, M may well *misrepresent itself*. Kriegel addresses this worry by appeal to the notion of *constituting self-representation*:

It may be possible [...] to capture both (a) the impossibility of "getting wrong" qualitative properties in the right kind of inner awareness, and (b) the lack of "whole distinction" between that awareness and what one is thereby aware of, by construing inner awareness in terms of *constituting* representation. The idea is that qualitative properties are *constituted* by the inner awareness representation of the conscious state. (Kriegel 2009: 109)

¹⁵ Here is the reasoning underlying Kriegel's explanation of subjective character in terms of a mental state's self-representation. First, subjective character is explained in terms of transitivity: a mental state M of a subject S has subjective character in virtue of S's being aware of M. Second, S's being aware of M is explained in terms of S's harboring a mental state M* that represents M, and in virtue of which S is aware of M. So, transitivity is explained in terms of meta-representation. The final step is the self-representationalist move: M = M*.

¹⁶ See Kriegel (2009: 113-29) for a thorough argument concerning Self-Representationalism's satisfaction of the *Inner Awareness Desideratum*.

To make sense of this, Kriegel distinguishes “two kinds of property—the properties represented and the properties constituted by the representation” (*ibid.*). The latter are those that ultimately constitute the qualitative character. First-order representational properties (what he calls “schmalitative properties”), by themselves, do not yet constitute qualitative character. For there to be qualitative character, first-order representational properties need themselves be represented. So, in this framework, when you fill your mouth with strawberries, you have a first-order representation of them, which constitutes the “schmalitative” property of your taste experience. By itself, this property is unconscious and does not yet amount to qualitative character. Your experience gets its qualitative character in virtue of *representing the first-order state to represent* strawberries. The representing that is constitutive of qualitative character does not amount to a distinct mental state but to the very same state’s representing itself. In this sense it is a constituting *self*-representation.

This entails that Self-Representationalism’s official account of qualitative character is in fact crucially different from what preliminarily announced. Though first-order representation may have a *causal* role with respect to qualitative character, it does *not* have any *constitutive* role. For M’s qualitative character is fully determined by M’s representing itself as representing P. M’s (first-order) representing P plays, at most, a causal role in the occurrence of qualitative character—in the “good case,” it causes M’s representing itself as representing P. Indeed, the theory allows for “bad” cases in which M (first-order) represents P but represents itself as representing Q (i.e., cases in which first-order representation fails to cause a veridical self-representation); in such cases, M’s qualitative character is Q-ish (and not P-ish). This kind of cases would not be allowed if the theory implied that first-order representation participates in constituting qualitative character. So, on Self-Representationalism, qualitative character is constituted and fully determined by *self-representation*: constituting self-representation *makes it the case* that M has the qualitative character it has. Therefore, qualitative character is ultimately *not* determined by M’s *representing something*, but rather by M’s *representing itself to represent something*:

SR (*Qualitative Character*)_{modi}: For any mental state M, M has qualitative character iff it is (self-)represented to represent something (in the right way).

The solution to intimacy made available by constituting self-representation should be clear: since self-representation is what *determines* qualitative character, it just cannot be the case that it misses or mischaracterizes its target. Accordingly, whenever M *appears* to have qualitative property Q, M *does have* Q. The *Intimacy Desideratum* is thereby satisfied.

Note however that, although Self-Representationalism does not allow for any appearance/reality gap with respect to qualitative properties, it does allow for an appearance/reality gap with respect to *first-order representation* (what constitutes Kriegel’s “schmalitative properties”). As noted, since the relationship between first-order representation and qualitative character is merely causal, it is possible for the latter to misrepresent the former. So, it may occur that you have a taste experience with strawberry-ish qualitative character (that is, an experience representing itself to represent strawberry in the right way), even if what your experience (first-order) represents is banana. Kriegel explicitly acknowledges this consequence, but stresses that it implies no backwash on intimacy:

One can misrepresent to oneself the schmalitative properties of one's conscious experience; but these schmalitative properties are not part of the experience's phenomenal character, indeed are not phenomenologically manifest in any way. The phenomenologically manifest properties, those that do form part of the phenomenal character, are the qualitative properties. Those cannot be misrepresented in the relevant kind of inner awareness [...]. (2009: 110)

We will dig into a critical evaluation of this move in the next section. Before that, let me summarize a few further details of Kriegel's account of *subjective character*.

As noted, on Self-Representationalism, M has subjective character in virtue of *suitably* representing itself: self-representation is a necessary condition, but to be also sufficient it must meet some further requirements. First, it must be *specific* rather than generic. Consider the following two sentences (adapted from Kriegel 2009: 159): (i) "All the sentences of this paper are written in English;" (ii) "This sentence is written in English." (i) represents itself generically, whereas (ii) represents itself specifically. For self-representation to be suitable for constituting consciousness it must be akin to (ii) in this respect: it must be "a representation that purports to represent a particular" (Kriegel 2009: 160). Second, it must be *essential* rather than accidental. Compare: (iii) "The sentence *composed of twenty-nine words, one of which is the word 'sentence', which is part of a paper called 'An Acquaintance Alternative to Self-Representationalism', is written in English*" and, again, (ii) "This sentence is written in English." (iii) represents itself via a description that picks out that very sentence only accidentally—it represents what merely *happens* to be itself—while (ii) represents itself essentially—it represents itself *qua* itself. Suitable conscious self-representation must be akin to (ii) also in this respect. Finally, it must be *non-derivative*, rather than derivative. Sentence (ii) is specifically and essentially self-representing but, obviously, it is not conscious, nor is it *for* anyone (at least not in the sense that is relevant to subjective character). This is so, according to Kriegel, because (ii) represents itself only derivatively. Derivative representations "owe their content to interpretation," whereas non-derivative representations "have their content in and of themselves:"

Thus, the concatenation of symbols c^at does not represent cats in and of itself, since the very same concatenation might represent two-headed space elephants in a language yet to be invented. The word "cat" means what it means because we interpret it the way we interpret it. By contrast, a thought about cats seems to represent cats in and of itself, and not because of the way we interpret it: we interpret it the way we interpret it because it represents what it represents, not the other way round. (2009: 158, footnote omitted)

So, to be suitable for subjective character, self-representation must be non-derivative in this sense. Accordingly, here is Kriegel's refined account of subjective character (2009: 164):

SR (Subjective Character)_{nr}: Necessarily, for any conscious mental state M, M has subjective character iff M is *non-derivatively*, *specifically*, and *essentially* self-representing.

3. Reasons for exploring an Acquaintance alternative

In this section, I point at what strike me as the main weaknesses of Self-Representationalism. Though not fatal, they are sufficient to motivate exploring an alternative account. The idea is that if there is an alternative theory that is on a par with Self-Representationalism with respect to explanatory power, but is not affected by the relevant weaknesses, it should be preferred. In the next section I will argue that the Acquaintance account is such an alternative.

3.1. *Explanatory idleness of first-order representation*

As noted, differently from what Kriegel preliminarily announces in his first-approximation characterization of the theory, Self-Representationalism ultimately accounts for qualitative character *not* in terms of *first-order* representation, but in terms of *constituting meta-(self-)*representation. Accordingly, a mental state M has its qualitative character not in virtue of (suitably) representing something, but in virtue of *being (self-)represented* to (suitably) represent something. In this framework, first-order representation has no role in the constitution or determination of qualitative character: the latter is constituted and fully determined by the self-representation. As it turns out, on Self-Representationalism, first-order representation is in fact *explanatorily idle* (cf. Kidd 2011: 367; Coleman 2015; McClelland 2020: 477). Whether your taste experience represents strawberry or banana is *irrelevant* to what it is like for you to have the taste experience you have; for the qualitative character of your experience is ultimately determined by your *representing your experience to represent* strawberry (or banana).

Kriegel may reply that, although first-order representation does not have any explanatory role in his theory, it still has a *causal* role.¹⁷ When everything goes as it is supposed to, the first-order representation causes its meta-representation. Compare this with perceptual representation. When the perceptual process goes as it is supposed to, the worldly object (and its properties) causes the subject's perceptual representation of it. Although there is no *constitutive* connection between the worldly object and the perceptual representation,¹⁸ there is a *causal* connection, which is far from being irrelevant to the theoretical model of perceptual experience. Analogously, although there is no constitutive connection between the first-order representation and its meta-representation, there is a causal connection, that does have a role to play in the self-representationalist model of consciousness.

However, such a causal connection does not seem sufficient to meet our intuitions about the role of first-order representation in the constitution of the phenomenology. For it seems that first-order representation should contribute to *determine* the phenomenology of experience. When you taste strawberry, the qualitative phenomenal aspect of your experience seems to be (at least partially) *constituted* by your experience's representing strawberry. Plausibly, your experience *seems* to be so constituted because it *is* so constituted. More generally, if a conscious mental state represents anything at all, then it is plausible to suppose that the relevant representation will play a role in determining its

¹⁷ Uriah Kriegel, personal communication.

¹⁸ Except, of course, for naïve realists.

phenomenology. But if qualitative character is fully determined by self-representation, whether the experience represents strawberry, banana, or anything else is just irrelevant to the constitution of its phenomenology.

In other words, Self-Representationalism, by appealing to constituting representation, seems to reverse the intuitive *order of constitution* in the phenomenology of experience. For one thing, if your experience *appears* to you to represent strawberry, it seems to be so simply in virtue of its *representing strawberry*, rather than in virtue of its *representing itself to represent strawberry*. Arguably, if the experience represents itself to represent strawberry this is due to the fact that (i) the experience represents itself and (ii) it itself represents strawberry. For another thing, reversing the order of constitution clashes with a natural conception of the epistemology of experience. By having a conscious strawberry taste experience, you seem to be aware of strawberry in a certain way. Although there is a subtler aspect of the phenomenology that makes you seem to be also aware of the experience itself, what you are certainly and most prominently aware of is strawberry. Plausibly, this is explained by the fact that your experience represents strawberry: the experience's representing strawberry (in a certain way) is what makes you aware of strawberry (in a certain way). But if the first-order representation plays no role in the constitution of the phenomenology, this cannot be so. Self-Representationalism seems to be committed to the idea that your experience only makes you aware of *what and how the experience is represented by you to represent*, and never makes you *genuinely* aware of *what and how the experience itself represents*.¹⁹

A theory that attributes a constitutive (rather than merely causal) role to first-order representation should be preferable.

3.2. Epistemic insulation from the world

One of the promises of Self-Representationalism is to account for the fact that having a conscious experience makes one aware *both* of the world and of the experience itself. The self-representational account of subjective character is what explains one's awareness of the experience itself: one is aware of the experience in virtue of harboring a *representation* of the experience (i.e., the experience's *self-representation*). On the other hand, qualitative character is, arguably, the aspect of experience in virtue of which one is aware of the world. This is explained straightforwardly if qualitative character is determined by first-order representation: by having an experience of x , S is aware of x in virtue of the experience's representing x (in the right way). While *representation of the experience* is what makes one aware of the *experience*, *representation of the world* is what makes one aware of the *world*.

But if qualitative character is *not* determined by first-order representation—if it is not determined by the way we represent the world—explanation of awareness of the world is, at least, not so straightforward. If qualitative character is fully determined by a meta-representation of the experience and first-order representation of worldly objects plays no constitutive role in it, our epistemic

¹⁹ This epistemic issue is related to next subsection's objection.

connection with the world seems to be much looser than what it intuitively appears to be. For, plausibly, what meta-representation of the experience makes one aware of is the experience itself, rather than the world. Consider again your strawberry taste experience. If what determines the qualitative character of your experience is its representing strawberry, then it is easy to see how your experience makes you aware *of strawberry*: you are aware of strawberry in virtue of your experience having a strawberry-ish qualitative character that is determined by the experience's representing strawberry. But if representing strawberry plays no constitutive role and qualitative character is fully determined by the experience's representing *itself*, then it is harder to see how your experience makes you aware of strawberry rather than *of the experience* itself. Furthermore, since your experience could have the same strawberry-ish qualitative character even if it represented banana, qualitative character seems to provide you with no information about what the experience represents. More generally, since first-order representation is irrelevant to the determination of qualitative character, the latter fails to play any role in the subject's epistemic grasp of the world. Qualitative character, however, is the only aspect of phenomenal character that could plausibly play such a role. Self-Representationalism thus seems to leave us *epistemically insulated* from the world.

The self-representationalist would insist that Self-Representationalism does *not* insulate us epistemically from the world.²⁰ Recall, on Self-Representationalism, although it does not have any constitutive role, first-order representation still contributes a *causal* role in the formation of qualitative character. Consider perception again: (letting radical skepticism aside) the possibility of perceptual illusion and hallucination does not seem to threaten the idea that, typically, we are genuinely aware of things in the world. (Part of) what ensures that is the causal relationship between the worldly object and its perceptual representation in the subject. The same reasoning applies “one level up”: the fact that qualitative character may misrepresent or mistarget first-order representation does not imply epistemic insulation. For the causal connection between first-order representation and (the representation of it that constitutes) qualitative character ensures that the subject is genuinely aware of what the first-order representation represents.

This may be fair enough. Still, with its epicycle about qualitative character, Self-Representationalism makes our awareness of the world more complex than what it intuitively seems to be, for it introduces a sort of “intermediary stage” in the perceptual process from the perceived object to the subject's awareness of it. As a result, awareness of the object seems to be somewhat *indirect*: by having an experience with a certain qualitative character, what the subject is aware of is, strictly speaking, the experience itself; for it is representation of the experience that constitutes qualitative character. Representation of the object playing no constitutive role in the determination of qualitative character, the subject is only derivatively aware of the object itself. Besides, by introducing such an intermediary stage, self-representationalism redoubles the possibilities of error: error may occur not only in the formation of first-order representation (which may misrepresent its target) but also in the formation of the meta-representation that constitutes qualitative character. All this is

²⁰ Uriah Kriegel, personal communication. He also pointed out to me that allowing for the *possibility* of solipsism and idealism is a *virtue* of the view, rather than a vice—since this makes it neutral as to any epistemological or metaphysical presupposition around the existence of the external world.

certainly not destructive for Self-Representationalism; however, at the very least, a theory that—*ceteris paribus* with respect to explanatory power—avoids that intermediary stage is preferable.

3.3. *Partial intimacy*

As noted, an important advantage of Self-Representationalism over HOR is that it satisfies the *Intimacy Desideratum*. The introduction of constituting self-representation is precisely aimed at accounting for the lack of appearance/reality gap in conscious experience: since self-representation is what *determines* phenomenal character, it just cannot be the case that an experience appears to have a phenomenal character that it does not have.

However, constituting self-representation also screens off first-order representation and thereby does introduce an appearance-reality gap with respect to it (*cf.* Coleman 2015). As illustrated in §2, Self-Representationalism implies that there is no necessary connection between first-order representation and qualitative character. What determines the qualitative character of your strawberry taste experience is just your representing it to represent strawberry; thus, it may occur that you represent your experience to represent strawberry even though what it really represents is banana. Accordingly, it may merely *appear* to you that your taste experience represents strawberry, while what your taste experience *really* represents is banana.

This is, arguably, a severe limitation to intimacy. The representational properties of conscious experience seem to be part of what should be disclosed to us (rather than being screened off). Regardless of whether an experience accurately represents the world, *its representing the world to be a certain way* seems to be part of what we have “intimate relationship” with in inner awareness. Your taste experience may misrepresent its object: it may represent strawberry while what is in your mouth is banana. But it is odd to think that the experience may itself be misrepresented—that it may be represented by you to represent strawberry while what it really represents is banana. To be sure, there are innumerable properties (and, possibly, even some *essential* properties) of a conscious experience that are not disclosed to us in inner awareness (its occurring on a certain day of the week, its being correlated with the activation of a certain area of the brain, etc.). And there are some representational properties that cannot be disclosed to us because they are unconscious. But when it comes to *conscious* experience, its representational properties seem to be part of what should be disclosed.

Arguably, self-representationalists would disagree and object that what is essential to intimacy is just that the experience does not appear to have *phenomenal* (qualitative) properties it does not have. This leaves the possibility open for *representational* properties to be misrepresented. For what is inconceivable, to those who feel the pull of the no-appearance/reality gap intuition, is that (i) it appears to the subject that there is a certain experience while in fact there is none and (ii) it appears to the subject that their experience has a certain phenomenology while in fact the experience has a different phenomenology. Self-Representationalism rules out both (i) and (ii). That an experience appears to have some *representational* properties that it does not have is *not* inconceivable: it is indeed a

(metaphysical and probably, on their view, also nomological) possibility. Accordingly, it should *not* be ruled out.²¹

However, this response seems to commit self-representationalism to a “separatist” view about the relationship between the phenomenal and the representational, one on which consciousness and intentionality are, to an important extent, independent of each other. Separatism, however, is a minority position nowadays and Kriegel himself defends the phenomenal intentionality theory (Kriegel 2011). Therefore, arguably, separatism should be an undesired consequence for self-representationalists. In any case, at the very least, it seems that it would be better to have a theory of consciousness that (*ceteris paribus* with respect to explanatory power) accounts for the intuition that (i) necessarily, a conscious experience has the representational properties it appears to have and (ii) this is so because representational properties *determine* qualitative properties (*cf.* considerations about the order of constitution intuitions in §3.1).

3.4. Inner awareness and cognitive achievement

Plausibly, by having a conscious experience a subject comes to *know* something about it: inner awareness provides the subject with some information about the phenomenology of the experience. If, while you put a strawberry in your mouth, I ask you what it tastes like, you are immediately able to give some reply, just in virtue of the taste experience you are having and without necessarily attending to it. More generally, the mere fact of *having* (being innerly aware of) a certain conscious experience gives you access to (at least some) information about its qualitative properties. In this sense, inner awareness constitutes a *cognitive achievement*. Arguably, to constitute a cognitive achievement, inner awareness must involve *acquisition* of information that is *generated* or anyway already *carried by the experience*. To be clear, this does *not* imply that we are *infallible* about our experiences, or that we have epistemic access to *all* the information that is carried by our experiences, but only that, by being innerly aware of an experience, we have epistemic access to at least *some* information about its phenomenology.

If, however, inner awareness is construed as a self-representation that constitutes and thereby *determines* the qualitative character, it cannot constitute any cognitive achievement. In this framework, inner awareness does not involve *acquiring* any information about the qualitative character of experience, for such information is just *generated* by inner awareness itself. For there to be information acquisition via inner awareness, the relevant information should instead be already carried by the experience, independently of its being the object of inner awareness. On Self-Representationalism, then, what puts you in a position to report about the taste of the strawberry in your mouth is *not* the fact that by being aware of the taste experience you acquire information about its qualitative properties;

²¹ It may be replied that Self-Representationalism rules out intimacy only with the representational properties of the *first-order state*, but not with the representational properties of the *experience*. However, since, on Self-Representationalism, the experience and the first-order state are not distinct—they are the *same* state—the representational properties of the first-order state *are also* representational properties of the experience.

rather, it is the fact that being aware of your taste experience *makes it the case* that information about qualitative character is generated.

It may be replied that the fact that inner awareness generates information does not preclude it from also acquiring that information—and, thus, being a cognitive achievement.²² Now, it is true that, in virtue of inner awareness' generating information about qualitative character, such information may be available to the subject. This may be considered as a "cognitive achievement." However, if it is, it is an extremely thin one, and one that certainly does *not* involve information *acquisition*. For the information generated by inner awareness that is available to the subject is information that the subject *already has* (rather than acquires), just in virtue of being innerly aware of a certain experience. For inner awareness to allow for information acquisition about a certain experience, it needs to be that in virtue of which the subject gets information that the experience carries *independently* of the subject's being innerly aware of it. Arguably, for there to be genuine cognitive achievement, information *acquisition* from a source by a receiver, rather than mere *possession* by a source of the information it generates, is required.

Kriegel anticipates the cognitive-achievement objection, but dismisses it rather quickly:

It may be objected that the phenomenon of intimacy requires [...] involving a genuine *cognitive achievement*, of the sort captured (for example) in infallibility theses. In the constituting-representation account, however, there is no genuine representational achievement. There is only the theoretician's decision to focus on properties that are definitionally tied to representation. My response to this objection is that, if something as strong as this is built into intimacy, it becomes more plausible to [...] deny the "datum." (2009: 111, italics original, footnote omitted)

By "denying the datum" he means dumping intimacy altogether, if intimacy is understood as requiring infallibility. Kriegel's reply, then, is that if intimacy is to form a package deal with cognitive achievement, the intimacy desideratum turns out much less plausible and should be rejected.

As noted, however, cognitive achievement does *not* need to involve infallibility as Kriegel seems instead to imply. The problem with Kriegel's account is that it rules out not only the possibility for inner awareness to be infallible, but also, and much more worryingly, the possibility for inner awareness to constitute *any* cognitive achievement—even the more modest (not infallibility-requiring) one advocated here.

At any rate, Kriegel seems to be unworried by the lack of cognitive achievement in inner awareness. However, arguably, this is more problematic than he seems to suggest. The cognitive achievement that comes with information acquisition is what makes inner awareness *epistemically significant*: it is what makes it the case that, by being innerly aware of an experience, we come to know its qualitative properties. Without such a cognitive achievement, inner awareness is left epistemically inert. Self-Representationalism's appeal to constituting representation, then, deprives inner awareness of any epistemic significance.

²² I owe this objection to an anonymous referee.

It may be argued that a different version of Self-Representationalism, one that reverses the order of constitution and construes self-representation in “quotational,” rather than “constituting,” terms, could dodge the difficulties highlighted above.²³ The idea would be that conscious-making self-representation represents first-order representation partly in virtue of *being constituted* by it—by entering with it a sort of *embedding* relation. On such a theory, first-order representation would play a constitutive role in determining the phenomenology and would thereby be neither explanatorily idle, nor epistemically irrelevant. Full intimacy with the experience’s representational properties would be restored and inner awareness could be construed as a genuine cognitive achievement. I agree that a theory along these lines promises to overcome Self-Representationalism’s difficulties. However, such a theory would substantially drift apart from the spirit of Self-Representationalism. Indeed, it would be much more akin to an *Acquaintance* theory. As we will see in the next section, often Acquaintance theories construe acquaintance as intimately connected to an “embedding” or “constitutive” relation.²⁴

4. The Acquaintance account: what it says, why it’s better

The kind of Acquaintance account I sketch here aims to inherit the virtues of Self-Representationalism without incurring its difficulties, by modelling consciousness in terms of the relation of acquaintance instead of constituting self-representation. The core claim of the Acquaintance account is, roughly, that for any conscious mental state *M*, *M* is phenomenally conscious in virtue of its subject’s being acquainted with it.

The version of the Acquaintance account I propose is, in a certain sense, a *hybrid* view: partly representationalist, partly non-representationalist. It is, to some extent, *representationalist* in that it characterizes *qualitative* character in representational terms. It is however, to an important extent, *non-representationalist* because *subjective* character is accounted for in non-representational terms. At a first approximation, the idea is that any conscious experience has its qualitative character in virtue of representing something and its subjective character in virtue of its subject’s being acquainted with it:

Acquaintance (Qualitative Character): For any conscious mental state *M*, *M* has qualitative character iff it represents something (in the right way).

Acquaintance (Subjective Character): For any conscious mental state *M*, *M* has subjective character iff its subject is acquainted with *M*.

A specification is in order. Although the version I propose spells out qualitative character in terms of first-order representation, nothing prevents other versions of the Acquaintance account from spelling

²³ I owe this suggestion to Matt Duncan.

²⁴ “Embedding” or “quotational” accounts of a similar sort have been put forward by Gertler (2001), Papineau (2002), Balog (2012), and Coleman (2015). None of them dubs their account as “self-representational” and some of them explicitly present their theory *in contraposition* to representationalism (see *esp.* Coleman 2015). In fact, most of them describe their account in terms of acquaintance.

it out otherwise, e.g., in naïve realist or in adverbialist terms. So, the qualitative-character bit of the theory may vary across versions. What *is* essential to an Acquaintance account is that it spells out *subjective character* in terms of the relation of acquaintance. That said, I opt for a representationalist account of qualitative character mainly because (i) it strikes me as the most plausible and (ii) it seems better placed to account for the qualitative character of *all* experiences (naïve realism, for example, may perhaps be plausible as an account of the qualitative character of perceptual experiences, but less plausible as an account of other kinds of experience such as, e.g., emotions).²⁵ Also, my account is neutral as to the precise variety of representationalism about qualitative character (Russellian vs. Fregean, pure vs. impure). My preference goes to impure Fregean representationalism, but nothing in my argument hinges on this. Most of what I say in what follows applies to all representationalist versions of the Acquaintance account about qualitative character and can be adapted to the non-representationalist versions.

In the remainder of this section, I say something more about what the notion of acquaintance involves (§4.1), I offer a sketch of the acquaintance account of consciousness I have in mind and how it satisfies the four desiderata (§4.2), and I show why it is better than Self-Representationalism (§4.3).

4.1. The acquaintance relation

Acquaintance is an epistemically significant mental relation, typically spelled out in terms of *direct awareness*, where the relevant directness is both epistemic and metaphysical (*cf.* Gertler 2011).²⁶ Acquaintance is *epistemically* direct in that, by being acquainted with x , a subject S gets an epistemic access to x which is *non-inferential*, i.e., does not depend on S 's having epistemic access to anything else (in particular, it is independent of S 's entertaining any judgment). It is *metaphysically* direct in that, when S is acquainted with x , no causal process mediates between x and S 's awareness of x . Differently from representation (that can be directed at non-existent objects), acquaintance entails the existence of its *relata*: if S is acquainted with x , then x (as well as, of course, S) exists.

Made popular by Bertrand Russell (1910, 1912), but then neglected for much of the twentieth century, the notion of acquaintance has recently regained momentum. The notion has attracted particular and more widespread interest in epistemology, both in the context of contemporary defenses of foundationalism about epistemic justification (Fales 1996; BonJour 2000, 2003; Fumerton

²⁵ There are good reasons for thinking that the phenomenology of at least some kinds of experience, such as bodily sensations, emotions, and moods, does *not reduce* to their representational content (Aydede and Fulkerson 2014; Kind 2014). For some of them—especially moods—it is even unclear that they have representational content at all (Searle 1983; Block 1995a, 1995b; Bordini 2017). However, my suggestion is *not* that the *whole* phenomenal character of any experience is to be characterized in representational terms (for the representationalist part of my account only concerns qualitative character) nor that it reduces to representational *content*: saying that any conscious experience has its qualitative character in virtue of representing something is compatible with the qualitative character depending not only on representational *content*, but also on representational *attitude*. Therefore, it is compatible with an *impure* version of representationalism (Crane 2003; Chalmers 2004).

²⁶ The epistemic significance of acquaintance is often taken to consist, at least, in its yielding a special kind of knowledge, namely *knowledge by acquaintance*.

1996, 2001, 2009; Hasan 2013) and in the more recent revival of Russellian (object-directed and non-propositional) *knowledge by acquaintance* (McGinn 2008; Tye 2008; Hofmann 2014; Fiocco 2017; Coleman 2019; Duncan 2020, 2021b; Giustina 2022). In philosophy of mind, the notion of acquaintance has featured mostly in the so called “phenomenal concept strategy” defense of physicalism about phenomenal consciousness (Papineau 2002, 2006; Balog 2012). It has also been appealed to for the explanation of some forms of introspection (Gertler 2001, 2011, 2012; Chalmers 2003; Horgan and Kriegel 2007; Giustina 2021). Some philosophers have proposed acquaintance-based accounts of consciousness (Hellie 2007; Coleman 2015; Williford 2015, 2019; Levine 2019) and subjectivity (James 1890; Russell 1912; Frege 1918; Kripke 2011; Duncan 2018) but the use of acquaintance in this area is still underexplored.²⁷ This paper’s ambition is to offer a contribution to the latter branch of the debate around acquaintance.²⁸

Many acquaintance theorists, though not all of them, hold that acquaintance is intimately connected to a constitutive relation between what the subject is acquainted with and a *mental state* of the subject. Often the idea is, roughly, that when S is acquainted with x , S is in a mental state M^* that is (partly) constituted by x .²⁹ Some naïve realists, for example, argue that when S perceives o (i.e., is perceptually acquainted with o), S has a perceptual experience that is (partly) constituted by o . Some theorists of phenomenal concepts (e.g., proponents of the “quotational” account, such as Balog 2012) argue that phenomenal concepts formed via introspective acquaintance are (partly) constituted by the experience they refer to. Similarly, on some theories of introspection (e.g., Gertler 2001 and Chalmers 2003), introspective acquaintance involves the introspected state being “embedded” or come to (partly) constitute the introspective state.

Among Acquaintance theories of *consciousness*, some (e.g., Coleman 2015 and Williford 2015, 2019) maintain that a constitutive relation between mental states is what *grounds* acquaintance (or even what acquaintance most fundamentally *is*): S is acquainted with M in virtue of being in M^* and of M^* ’s being (partly) constituted by M. The (most relevant) alternative is to construe acquaintance as a direct relation between a subject and one of its mental states, one that does *not* depend on any constitutive relation between mental states. I am sympathetic to the former kind of view, i.e., the one that explains acquaintance in terms of a constitutive relation between mental states.³⁰ I do not have the space to argue for this here, though.³¹ So, in the remainder of this paper I will just assume that, on the

²⁷ Whereas acquaintance-based accounts of consciousness typically rely on the idea that subjects are acquainted with their *experiences*, the acquaintance-based accounts of subjectivity cited in the main text rely on the idea that subjects are acquainted with *themselves as subjects* (see especially Duncan 2018a for an interesting and nicely developed account of subjective character in terms of self-acquaintance). The theory I propose belongs to the former group of acquaintance theories, i.e., those that claim that subjects are acquainted with their experiences and that this is what makes such experiences conscious and constitutes their subjective character.

²⁸ Raleigh (2019) and Duncan (2021a) offer excellent and very useful introductions to the notion of acquaintance. See also Knowles and Raleigh (2019) for a recent collection devoted to acquaintance.

²⁹ Whether constitution is full or partial may vary among theories.

³⁰ I find Ken Williford’s (2019) theory (on which, very roughly, an experience is conscious in virtue of being self-acquainted) particularly interesting and somewhat close to my own views on consciousness and acquaintance.

³¹ And this *does* require thorough argumentation, for not all acquaintance theorists accept it (see, e.g., Duncan 2018). Arguing for this is, indeed, object of further work.

Acquaintance account of consciousness, acquaintance is a mental relation between a subject S and a mental state M of S, and remain neutral on whether such a relation depends on, or is intimately connected to, a constitutive relation between M and some mental state M* of S.

4.2. *The Acquaintance account*

As noted, the account I propose is a sort of hybrid view, where qualitative character is accounted for in terms of first-order representation and subjective character is accounted for in terms of acquaintance.

First-order representation is what constitutes qualitative character. However, by itself, first-order representation is not sufficient for consciousness (for consciousness also requires *subjective* character). Acquaintance is what makes the first-order representation conscious and it is that in virtue of which conscious representation has subjective character. The first-order representation is the *terminus* of the acquaintance relationship—it is that which one is acquainted with.

By being acquainted with the first-order representation, the subject becomes aware of the experience’s qualitative character. By being the terminus of acquaintance, qualitative character is not merely *in* the subject (like unconscious representation such as subliminal perception), but also *for* the subject. To use a metaphor (to be taken with a pinch of salt!): acquaintance *illuminates* first-order representation, thereby making the subject aware of it; this is what makes the first-order representation conscious. Without acquaintance, first-order representation is, so to speak, “in the dark”—it is unconscious. When it becomes the terminus of acquaintance, first-order representation “comes to light” and is thereby “revealed” to the subject—it becomes conscious.

Now, if first-order representation can be unconscious and qualitative character is nothing over and above first-order representation (i.e., if it is fully constituted by it), then the Acquaintance account entails the possibility of *unconscious qualitative character*. This may raise concern in some readers. Qualitative character, it may be thought, is an aspect of the *phenomenology* of experience and phenomenal aspects are always *conscious* aspects. Allowing for unconscious qualitative character is therefore a pitfall of the view.

Qualitative character is indeed an essential aspect of the phenomenology. However, it is so only when the mental state that has it is *conscious*. Whereas I agree that there cannot be any unconscious experience with *phenomenal* character (for, on my view, phenomenal character is by definition a property that only conscious experiences can have),³² there can yet be unconscious states with *qualitative* character (cf. Coleman 2022). Unconscious qualitative character is just unconscious first-order representation that has the *disposition* to become conscious. So, unconscious reddishness is reddishness *in potentia*: it is a first-order representation of red that has the disposition to become reddish phenomenology. That there can be unconscious qualitative character does not mean or imply

³² Though note that not all theorists agree on this. Rosenthal (2005) and Carruthers (2005), for example, maintain that there can be unconscious phenomenal states.

that there can be unconscious phenomenology. It only means that what constitutes the qualitative aspect of phenomenal character—first-order representation—can exist unconsciously. Qualitative character is an aspect of *phenomenal* character only when “illuminated” by acquaintance—that is, only when it becomes conscious.

First-order representation, then, is what determines qualitative character and acquaintance is what makes it conscious. Here emerges a fundamental difference between Self-Representationalism and the Acquaintance account. As noted, on Self-Representationalism, self-representation *constitutes* qualitative character: the qualitative character of experience is *determined* by the self-representation. On the Acquaintance account, by contrast, the order of constitution is inverted. Acquaintance does *not* determine qualitative character—it merely “illuminates” it, thereby making it conscious. Rather, it is the qualitative character of M that determines *what one is aware of* by being acquainted with M. Accordingly, differently from Self-Representationalism, the Acquaintance account does not allow for cases of mismatch between first-order representation and qualitative character; that is, it does not allow for cases where you have a first-order representation of banana but a strawberry-ish qualitative character.

The Acquaintance account here proposed satisfies all four desiderata presented in §1. It provides an account of subjective character and thereby satisfies the *Subjective Character Desideratum*. It implies that a mental state is conscious only if the subject is aware of it (for it is the subject’s being acquainted with a mental state that makes it conscious, and acquaintance is a kind of awareness), so it satisfies the *Transitivity Desideratum*. Being a relation that entails the existence of its relata and being epistemically direct make acquaintance straightforwardly satisfy the *Intimacy Desideratum*: there cannot be targetless inner awareness because inner awareness is acquaintance and there cannot be acquaintance with something that does not exist or is not present (since acquaintance entails the existence of the relata); there cannot be mischaracterizing inner awareness because acquaintance is epistemically direct and thereby reveals all and only M’s phenomenal properties (it puts the subject in “direct cognitive contact” with M). Finally, the Acquaintance account satisfies the *Inner Awareness Desideratum*: what accounts for inner awareness of M, on the Acquaintance account, is not an unconscious mental state in virtue of which the subject is aware of M; rather, a subject is innerly aware of M just in virtue of bearing the acquaintance relation to M, and such a relation is phenomenally manifest—indeed, it is what constitutes M’s subjective character.

4.3. Acquaintance vs. constituting self-representation

In this subsection, I show why acquaintance does not incur the difficulties that affect Self-Representationalism.

4.3.1. *Acquaintance does not make first-order representation explanatorily idle.* As noted, the Acquaintance account *explains* qualitative character in terms of first-order representation. Unlike Self-Representationalism, then, the Acquaintance account does *not* make first-order representation explanatory idle. First-order representation has here a role that is not merely causal, but *constitutive* of

qualitative character. Qualitative character is therefore explained by first-order representation. So, on the Acquaintance account, when you put a strawberry in your mouth, it is in virtue of your (first-order) representing strawberry that your taste experience has a strawberry-ish qualitative character. Whether your taste experience represents strawberry or banana is *not irrelevant* to what it is like for you to have the taste experience you have; indeed, that is what makes the difference between your strawberry taste experience and your banana taste experience.

4.3.2. *Acquaintance does not epistemically insulate us from the world.* We saw that one worry for Self-Representationalism is its potentially implying epistemic insulation. Its construing qualitative character in terms of self-representation of the experience, rather than in terms of first-order representation, seems to imply that we are always aware of our experiences but never of the world. Qualitative character gives us information about the experience itself rather than about the world and the epistemic connection with the world seems to be lost.

By construing qualitative character in terms of first-order representation, the Acquaintance view does not face this worry and provides a smooth account of the fact that having a conscious experience makes one aware *both* of the world and of the experience itself. Acquaintance is what makes one aware of the *experience* itself. Qualitative character, which is determined by first-order representation, is what makes one aware of the *world* and provides one with information about the world: you are aware of strawberry in virtue of your experience having a strawberry-ish qualitative character that is determined by the experience's representing strawberry; by having an experience with such qualitative character (if the experience is veridical) you acquire information about the strawberry in your mouth.

By avoiding the introduction of an “intermediary stage” in the perceptual process, the Acquaintance view offers a simpler and more straightforward account of our knowledge of the world. One consequence of this is that the Acquaintance view turns the possibility of error back to one: error, here, can only occur in the formation of the first-order representation.³³

4.3.3. *Acquaintance offers a full account of intimacy.* Differently from Self-Representationalism, the Acquaintance account implies that there is no appearance/reality gap not only with respect to phenomenal character, but also with respect to first-order representation: it cannot be the case that your experience *appears* to represent strawberry while it *really* represents banana. The representational properties of conscious experience are disclosed to the subject in virtue of the subject's being acquainted with them.

The Acquaintance view thus accounts for the intuition that (i) necessarily, a conscious experience has the representational properties it appears to have and (ii) this is so because representational properties *determine* qualitative properties.

4.3.4. *Acquaintance entails that inner awareness is a cognitive achievement.* By “illuminating” qualitative character (rather than determining it, as theorized by Self-Representationalism), acquaintance makes the information carried by first-order representation available to consciousness. It thereby enables the

³³ Of course, there can be meta-level error when it comes to introspective judgment. Here, however, I am just concerned with merely conscious (non-introspected) experience.

subject to *acquire* information about the qualitative properties of their experience—information that the experience has independently of the acquaintance relation. Accordingly, acquaintance constitutes a *cognitive achievement* and thereby accounts for the epistemic significance of inner awareness.

*

It would then seem that the Acquaintance account offers a better theoretical model of phenomenal consciousness than Self-Representationalism. While satisfying all our key desiderata, it does not incur the difficulties that affect Self-Representationalism. Why, then, has it been disregarded by self-representationalists? Kriegel, in fact, offers an argument against the Acquaintance view, which I consider and evaluate in the next section.

5. Is constituting self-representation better than acquaintance?

Kriegel explicitly considers acquaintance as a potential competitor to self-representation, especially when it comes to satisfying the intimacy desideratum (2009: 108-13). However, he argues that self-representation is to be preferred to acquaintance because, whereas the former is familiar and well-known, the latter is unfamiliar and mysterious:

The main reason to prefer the representational model [over the acquaintance model] is the issue of familiarity. The notion of representation is familiar and well behaved, whereas that of acquaintance is unfamiliar and somewhat mysterious. (2009: 112)

Kriegel's suspicion of acquaintance is mainly based on its being a relation that is denoted by what he calls a "basic factive mental verb". Like knowledge, acquaintance is denoted by a factive mental verb. Knowledge, however, asymmetrically depends on other relations that are denoted by some mental verb that is *not* factive (i.e., "to believe"); in this sense, "to know" is a *non-basic* factive mental verb. Acquaintance, instead, does not asymmetrically depend on any relation denoted by a non-factive mental verb; in this sense, "to be acquainted with" is a basic factive mental verb. Now, Kriegel points out that no other relation is denoted by a basic factive mental verb: acquaintance is *unique of its kind* in this respect. This, he argues, is an important reason to be suspicious about it:

"[A]cquainted with," in the relevant sense, is supposed to be a *basic* factive mental verb—something of which there is no other example. Since there is no other example of this, the relation denoted by "acquainted with" is unique and deeply unfamiliar. [...]

In other words, acquaintance seems to be the only exception to the following principle:

(NBF) For any mental relation R denoted by a verb V, if V is factive, then there is a mental relation R*, denoted by a verb V*, such that (i) R is asymmetrically dependent upon R* and (ii) V* is non-factive.

My claim is that we should hold onto this principle—call it the *principle of no basic factivity* (NBF) as universal and exceptionless. Since acquaintance is by definition a basic factive relation, it follows that there is no such thing as acquaintance. (2009: 112-13)

So, Kriegel's argument is that constituting self-representation is to be preferred to acquaintance as a model for inner awareness because it satisfies the intimacy desideratum while still being familiar and without violating NBF.

Now, a preliminary question concerns NBF. Is the principle so fundamental and indispensable that a mental relation's being an exception to it is by itself—independently of any other consideration—sufficient to refute the existence of that relation? NBF may be a good principle, one to stick to *ceteris paribus*. All other things being equal, a relation that is not *sui generis* in the sense specified by NBF is perhaps to be preferred to one that constitutes an exception to it. However, there does not seem to be a principled reason to consider NBF as *indispensable* and *non-negotiable*—nor does Kriegel provide any. Indeed, it seems to me that NBF should be considered as a “tie-breaker”, rather than as a fundamental principle. Of two theoretical models that are otherwise equal, the one that conforms to NBF should be preferred to the one that does not. If, however, a model is superior with respect to explanatory power, its implying an exception to NBF is not, in my opinion, sufficient a reason to dump it.

Regardless of NBF's indispensability and non-negotiability, there admittedly is a legitimate worry about acquaintance's uniqueness and apparent unanalyzability. Acquaintance is a special relation. Unlike representation, which can be found everywhere in nature, acquaintance only features in conscious minds. Unlike representation, which seems to be analyzable in causal or functional terms and thereby promises to offer a reductive physicalist account of consciousness, acquaintance seems to be refractory when it comes to physicalist reduction—though this is only *prima facie*. Katalin Balog (2012), for example, offers an account of acquaintance that is consistent with physicalism. If constituting representation is both familiar and analyzable, there are reasons to consider the self-representationalist model *ceteris paribus* theoretically superior to the acquaintance model.

However, even though constituting representation is both widespread and analyzable, the *special kind* of constituting representation that is needed for the self-representationalist account of consciousness is no less unfamiliar and unique than the relation of acquaintance. Or so I argue in the remainder of this section.

Constituting representation can be found out there in the world quite easily. Claude Monet's *Rouen Cathedral, Façade* depicts the Rouen Cathedral colored in red; it therefore represents it as red. In virtue of this, the Rouen Cathedral has acquired a new property: the property of being represented as red by Monet's painting. The new property of the Rouen Cathedral is *constituted* by the painting's representing it as red. Monet's painting therefore features a *constituting representation*: a representation that determines and is constitutive of the cathedral's new property. However, obviously, the cathedral does not thereby acquire a *conscious* property—nor does it acquire any qualitative character. To constitute a conscious property, some further condition must be met by constituting representation.

Indeed, Self-Representationalism appeals to constituting *self*-representation. Without further specifications, however, this is not yet sufficient. The sentence “This sentence is about books” represents itself to represent books; it thereby has the property of being represented to represent

books, which is constituted by the self-representation. However, it does not have any conscious property in virtue of this.

As noted, Kriegel adds three more conditions for self-representation to constitute consciousness: it must be *specific*, *essential*, and *non-derivative*. Now, the constituting representation of the sentence “This sentence is about books” is both specific and essential: it purports to pick itself out as a particular (rather than as a kind) and it does not just *happen* to represent itself (it represents itself *as itself*). So, what makes the difference between a constituting self-representation that constitutes consciousness and one that does not is the property of being *non-derivative*.³⁴ This seems to be what, at bottom, distinguishes consciousness-constituting from non-consciousness-constituting self-representation.

Now, as it happens, *only conscious states* are non-derivative representations (Kriegel 2009: 159, fn. 85): only conscious states can represent independently of interpretation. On Kriegel’s view, to represent something, unconscious states ultimately need to be interpreted either via a conscious representation or via an unconscious representation that is in turn interpreted via a conscious representation. In other words, only conscious states are *intrinsically* representational; unconscious states are representational only *derivatively*, that is, in virtue of being suitably related to conscious representational states. Therefore, all representation is grounded in conscious representation (Kriegel 2003b, 2007, 2011b):

[I]t is quite plausible that all intentionality derives from phenomenal intentionality (all representation derives from conscious representation). The idea is that there is a distinction to be made between derivative and non-derivative intentionality, and that only phenomenal intentionality is non-derivative. On this view, conscious representations are the only representations that represent in and of themselves, not because they are suitably related to other representations. Non-conscious representations, by contrast, represent only insofar as they are suitably related to conscious representations (namely, by whatever relation underlies the “derivation” of derivative intentionality from non-derivative intentionality). (Kriegel 2007: 318)

In this framework, then, conscious representation is *basic*, and it is the *only* representation to be so.

Now, basicness and uniqueness were put forward by Kriegel as the main motivation to reject acquaintance (the idea being that acquaintance is a mental relation denoted by a *basic* factive mental verb and thereby *unique* of its kind). But the special kind of constituting representation that is needed for the self-representationalist model of consciousness does not seem to fare better than acquaintance in terms of basicness and uniqueness. For the condition of being *non-derivative* implies constituting self-representation being basic and thereby unique of its kind (no non-conscious representation is non-derivative in this sense).

Moreover, although the notion of representation is familiar, when it comes to conscious constituting self-representation, we seem to face a very peculiar kind of representation and a rather *unfamiliar* one at that. Arguably, (at least part of) what makes the notion of representation familiar is its having been used for decades in philosophy of mind and cognitive sciences. What seems to dispel the sense of mysteriousness is (at least partly) its having been the object of a lively naturalization

³⁴ Recall, non-derivative representation is interpretation-independent representation.

program (starting with Dretske 1981 and Millikan 1984, 1993). The notion of *phenomenal intentionality* (and so that of *non-derivative representation*), however, is (at least *prima facie*) very different and no doubt more *mysterious* than the notion of intentionality involved in the naturalization program.

It may be objected that even if the kind of representation posited by Self-Representationalism is also unfamiliar and unique, it is still of the familiar, well-behaved type, *representation*. Acquaintance, on the other hand, does not belong to any familiar type, which makes it worse off, theoretically, than any kind of representation.³⁵ However, constituting self-representation seems to be a kind of representation *only nominally*. For, as noted, it has little if anything in common with the familiar, reductive notion of representation. Indeed, Self-Representationalism seems to face a dilemma (Levine 2006; see also Kriegel 2011a). Either constituting self-representation is of the familiar and naturalization-friendly kind or it is not. If it is, then the advantage of Self-Representationalism over First-Order Representationalism is unclear: if, as Self-Representationalism assumes, first-order representation is insufficient for consciousness, how can just adding more representation (self-representation) of the same kind by itself suffice to yield phenomenal consciousness? If, instead, constituting self-representation is *not* of the familiar kind, then it *could* be sufficient for consciousness. However, it would have to be a “representation of a different kind altogether” (Levine 2006: 195). So, there must be something *sui generis* and *special* about the kind of self-representation that is constitutive of consciousness. This makes constituting self-representation theoretically much closer to the notion of acquaintance than to that of representation (a similar point is made by Williford 2015).

Therefore, the special kind of constituting representation posited by Self-Representationalism does not seem to be theoretically better than acquaintance. At the very least, it is equally *basic*, *unfamiliar*, *unique*, and *mysterious*. Accordingly, the self-representationalist model and the acquaintance model are at least *on a par*. As I showed in §4, however, there are reasons to think that the Acquaintance account is indeed theoretically superior, because it provides an account of consciousness that, while satisfying all the same desiderata as Self-Representationalism, is not affected by the difficulties illustrated in §§3.1-3.4.

6. Conclusion

Acquaintance is admittedly unique of its kind. But so is consciousness-constituting self-representation. As I tried to show, the special kind of constituting self-representation that is required for the self-representationalist account of consciousness is no less basic, unique, unfamiliar, and mysterious than the acquaintance relation. After all, consciousness *is* a very puzzling and apparently mysterious phenomenon (though it may turn out less mysterious in the future), so it should not be surprising that theoretical accounts of it ultimately bump into a bedrock sense of mystery.³⁶ Besides, although

³⁵ I owe this objection to an anonymous referee.

³⁶ Kriegel himself advocates this line of thought: “[I]t should come as no surprise that an account of consciousness includes a *prima facie* mysterious element. For consciousness, while perhaps not *ultimately* mysterious, is surely *prima facie* mysterious, and its *prima facie* mysteriousness *should* be reflected in a *prima facie* mysterious element in the account of it.” (2003a: 127). Though *prima facie* mysterious, acquaintance may well turn out not to be *ultima facie* mysterious.

acquaintance's prospects for naturalization are still underexplored, this does not imply that they are null.³⁷

On the other hand, by avoiding the worries that affect Self-Representationalism, the Acquaintance account seems indeed to be theoretically more virtuous. In this paper, I have only offered a *sketch* of the Acquaintance account. Many details still need to be filled in and several issues must be addressed, including: Is the relation of acquaintance between S and M *primitive*, or is there a most fundamental fact (e.g., a constitutive relation between M and a mental state M* of S) in virtue of which it holds? Is acquaintance analyzable? What is the exact *terminus* of the acquaintance relation: is it an individual mental state at *t*, such as *tasting strawberry*, or is it rather one's *overall* experience at *t*? In virtue of what (if anything) does acquaintance make a subject *aware of* some of their mental states? These are topics for further work. With this paper, I hope to have shown, at the very least, that the Acquaintance view constitutes a valid alternative to Self-Representationalism as an account of phenomenal consciousness; an alternative that is both promising and worth exploring, especially for those who agree on my four core desiderata for a theory of consciousness.³⁸

³⁷ See, for example, Balog (2012) for an account making promising steps in this direction.

³⁸ For extremely helpful conversations on the topics of this paper I am grateful to Davide Bordini, Arnaud Dewalque, and Uriah Kriegel. I am particularly grateful to Uriah Kriegel and Matt Duncan for generous and extensive comments on a previous draft, as well as to two anonymous referees for *Philosophical Studies*. The paper also benefitted from being presented in the *Brainstorming* seminar at the University of Liège and in the online *Monthly Phenomenology* seminar.

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