

Acquaintance and the Formation of Negative Phenomenal Belief

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Gertler's (2012) account of acquaintance is inadequate because it cannot perform the explanatory role that it's supposed to perform. My argument builds from two central claims. First, I argue that our judgments about phenomenal absences have the special features that acquaintance is supposed to explain. Second, I argue that Gertler's take on acquaintance does not allow us to be acquainted with phenomenal absences. This suggests a general methodological lesson: when developing an account of the epistemology of acquaintance, we should make sure that we are capturing all of the relevant sorts of cases.

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
1. The desiderata for acquaintance.....	3
2. Negative phenomenal belief and the desiderata.....	5
3. A criterion of adequacy for acquaintance-based theories.....	12
4. Constitution and Gertler's theory.....	16
5. Conclusion.....	23
References.....	24

Introduction

Recent revivals of Russell's (1912) acquaintance theory of introspective knowledge have emerged in the literature, both in the philosophy of mind and in the theory of knowledge.¹ Acquaintance, i.e., this metaphysically direct cognitive relation, is posited to explain the special features of our judgments about our own mental states. Some take acquaintance as primitive.² Others offer an account of the nature of the relation.³ One of these accounts, in particular, Brie Gertler's (2001; 2011; 2012) includes a relation of constitution whereby your judgment about your experience is constituted by the experience itself and is thereby justified.

In this paper, I argue that Gertler's characterization of acquaintance is inadequate because her account cannot perform the explanatory role that it's supposed to perform. My argument builds from two central claims. First, I argue that our judgments about phenomenal absences have the special features that acquaintance is supposed to explain. Second, I argue that Gertler's take on acquaintance does not allow us to be acquainted with phenomenal absences.

Here is my overall plan. In sections 1-2, I defend two premises with the goal of showing why our judgments about phenomenal absences have the special features that are supposed to be explained by the acquaintance relation.

¹ These include Katalin Balog (2012), Lawrence BonJour (2003), David Chalmers (2003), Earl Conee (1994), Evan Fales (1996), Richard Feldman (2004), Richard Fumerton (1995), Brie Gertler (2011; 2012), Horgan and Kreigel (2007), Horgan (2012), Joseph Levine (2007), and David Pitt (2004).

² Cf. David Chalmers (2003).

³ Cf. Lawrence BonJour (2003), Richard Fumerton (1995), Brie Gertler (2001; 2011; 2012), and Katalin Balog (2012).

In section 3, I discuss the upshot of section 2. In particular, I explore two possibilities: either (i) acquaintance cannot explain why our judgments about our mental states have the special features that they do, or (ii) since our judgments about our mental states have these special features, a criterion of adequacy for any acquaintance-based theory is that it should allow us to be acquainted with phenomenal absences. I go on to pursue the latter.

In section 4, I defend the third premise of my argument—that Gertler’s characterization of acquaintance doesn’t allow us to be acquainted with phenomenal absences. From these three premises, I conclude that Gertler’s characterization of acquaintance is inadequate, since acquaintance, given her account, cannot perform the explanatory role that it’s supposed to perform.

Finally, I discuss the general upshot of my argument in section 5. After presenting a case for acquaintance-based judgments of phenomenal absences, I show why an otherwise promising account of the epistemology of acquaintance fails. This suggests a general methodological lesson: when developing an account of the epistemology of acquaintance, we should make sure that we are capturing all of the relevant sorts of cases.

1. The desiderata for acquaintance

Consider my first premise:

- (1) We posit acquaintance to explain the special features of our judgments about our own mental states.

Premise (1) requires clarification of two components. First, what are these special features that contemporary acquaintance theorists seek to explain? Second, how does the acquaintance relation we posit (assuming we are acquaintance theorists) allow us to explain these features?

Let me begin by addressing the first question. Contemporary acquaintance theorists are interested in defining the necessary and sufficient conditions for experiential knowledge. This sort of putative knowledge has the following features. First, it is non-inferential in nature. That is to say, when you judge that P—where P denotes some aspect of your experience or mental state—your judgment that P does not depend, i.e., epistemically, on any other belief or inference. Hence, the acquaintance theory can be widely classified as a type of internalist foundationalism.

Second, these judgments involve a special sort of justification, i.e., privileged access. On the acquaintance view, we have privileged access to our mental states through a distinct process – namely, introspection. This process is purportedly different from mere perception for the following reasons. When you judge, for example, that “the apple is red”, the relationship between your judgment and what makes it true is mediated by a causal process (the light reflects the surface properties of the object, which strikes your retina...and causes you to judge “the apple is red”). Moreover, what makes your judgment true—the fact that the apple has the property red—is some property had by some object out in the world, outside the vicinity of what can be grasped directly through

the introspective process. Conversely, when you judge “I am having a reddish experience” – the fact that your mental state instantiates phenomenal reddishness is what makes your judgment about it true. Further, this fact is available within the vicinity of your introspective access. There is thus an immediate connection between your mental state and your judgment about it. Since such judgments have these special features, the justification involved would differ from the justification of other putative classes of knowledge.

Now let me address the second question: how is acquaintance supposed to explain these special features? We posit acquaintance, i.e., this metaphysically direct, cognitive relation, to explain why these judgments are non-inferential in nature (i.e. epistemically direct) and why they involve a special sort of justification (i.e. privileged access). It is in virtue of metaphysical directness, i.e., this feature of the acquaintance relation, that we have privileged access to certain sorts of mental states while introspecting (e.g., token pain states, visual sensations, such as phenomenal reddishness, *inter alia*). That is to say, since the subject *S* stands in a metaphysically direct, cognitive relation of acquaintance to her current mental state *M*, her introspective judgment that *P* does not depend on other beliefs or inference. For *S* comes to judge that *P* by simply observing *M* while introspecting. Hence, epistemic directness (i.e., this feature of acquaintance-based judgments) is explained, in part, by metaphysical directness (i.e., this feature of the acquaintance relation itself). Given this metaphysically direct, cognitive relation of acquaintance that we posit, our phenomenal judgments involve a special sort of justification that some acquaintance theorists seek to define.⁴

⁴ While contemporary acquaintance theorists all agree with the claim that the justification involved in this process is special, they tend to diverge, however, in their explanatory accounts of

2. Negative phenomenal belief and the desiderata

Now consider my second premise:

(2) Our judgments about phenomenal absences have these special features.

My defense of premise (2) will involve two central components. First, I consider a particular case involving a judgment about a phenomenal absence and underscore why it has the special features. Second, I respond to objections throughout this discussion.

Suppose you are taken to the emergency room for some reason or other. The doctor then asks you a routine question that is posed to every patient upon entering the emergency room: “Rate the degree/severity of pain you are in on a scale of 1-10.” In response to this question, you pause for a moment and introspect on the various qualities of your current experience. After carefully attending to your experience, you confidently reply, “Gosh, I am not in pain! Is a rating of ‘0’ an option?”

Intuitively, it seems that you are justified in your judgment that you are not in pain. The idea that the doctor would disagree with you and tell you that you are mistaken seems odd, in this case. Now suppose, instead, the doctor concedes that, while your judgment is true, it is not the case that it is justified. This would seem even more odd. After all, you, the patient, are presumably the one who has access to the contents of your own mental states and it seems, *prima facie*, that your judgment would be justified, even if a full analysis of what exactly that justification consists in is not yet forthcoming.

what justification consists in. One of the most rigorous conditions for justification are proposed by Fumerton (1995) and BonJour (2003) – a subject must grasp that the fact that she is in a particular mental state is what makes her judgment about it true: “one has a noninferentially justified belief that *P* when one has the thought that *P* and one is acquainted with the fact that *P*, the thought that *P*, and the relation of correspondence holding between the thought that *P* and the fact that *P*.” (Fumerton 1995, 75); “...a foundational belief results when one directly sees or apprehends that one’s experience satisfies the description of it offered by the content of the belief.” (BonJour 2003, 191)

Now, instead of being complacent with *prima facie* plausibility, let us take a second pass at this case and evaluate it more carefully by the relevant criterion: Does your negative phenomenal judgment “I am not in pain”, in this case, have the special features that acquaintance-based knowledge purportedly has? That is to say, does it satisfy the desiderata, i.e., epistemic directness and privileged access?

Perhaps the best way to proceed would be to first eliminate defeaters. That is, let us first apply the desiderata to the thought experiment presented above (henceforth, ‘the emergency room case’) and rule out possible counterexamples to these desiderata.

What would a defeater to epistemic directness consist in? Well, since acquaintance theorists claim that some introspective knowledge is non-inferential in nature, i.e., epistemically direct, it follows that a defeater to epistemic directness would show that the judgment in question did involve inference after all. So let us take a second pass at the emergency room case and target potential defeaters to epistemic directness.

By what means did you come to your judgment “I am not in pain” while you were in the emergency room? When the doctor asked you to rate your degree of pain on a scale of 1-10, did you use reasons or inference when you paused for a moment, attended to your experience, and then went on to judge that you’re not in pain? Here is one such way you might use inference to judge that you’re not in pain. First, you might enumerate all of the qualities that are before you in your total phenomenal state Φ . You compile, as it were, a complete inventory of every aspect of your experience – the buzzing sound of the air-conditioner, the sound of people’s voices, the coldness of the room, the whitishness you experience when you look at the doctor’s coat, the feeling of a rapid pulse, the bluishness you experience when you look at the picture on the wall, the itchiness of the

mosquito bite on your foot, and so on. After you are satisfied that you have a complete inventory of Φ , you add a “that’s all clause”. Since you judge that the inventory you made of Φ is complete, and the quality ‘painfulness’ is not included in Φ , you infer that pain is not in Φ .

My response to this putative counterexample has two components. First, the notion that you could be acquainted with every aspect of your total phenomenal state at once is intuitively implausible. Since phenomenal states are typically very complex, this putative counterexample seems unlikely, unless your total phenomenal state happens to have an impoverished phenomenal content. Second, even if Φ has an impoverished phenomenal content and your judgment about it is the result of inference, it doesn’t follow that there aren’t any non-inferential judgments about phenomenal absences. For if you formulate your account of acquaintance-based knowledge existentially, as Brie Gertler does in her account⁵, then, by parity of reasoning, an instance of a negative phenomenal judgment that lacks the relevant desideratum fails as a counterexample to the claim that some phenomenal judgments do have the relevant desideratum. More carefully, the mere existence of a class of judgments that lacks the relevant feature does not disprove the existence of another class of judgments that do have the relevant feature. So, we can conclude that the emergency room case, originally formulated, lacks the defeater we targeted for epistemic directness.

But perhaps you are not yet convinced that we have been thoroughgoing in eliminating defeaters to epistemic directness. For you might object on the grounds that there is an apparent asymmetry between judgments about phenomenal absences and

⁵ “The acquaintance approach is defined by an existential thesis: namely, some introspective knowledge is knowledge by acquaintance.” (Gertler 2012, 102)

presences for the following reason. While some introspective judgments – i.e., acquaintance-based judgments – are non-inferential in nature, judgments about phenomenal absences may be inferential in nature while the relevant inference isn't *conscious* – something you were aware of doing. Do we thereby have a defeater to epistemic directness?

I concede it is possible that judgments about phenomenal absences involve unconscious inferences. But, this possibility has broad implications for introspective knowledge in general. For it is also possible that introspective judgments about phenomenal *presences* result from unconscious inferences. Before charging that there is an asymmetry between judgments about absences and presences because the former involve unconscious inferences while the latter do not, the objector would first need to defend judgments about presences against the charge that they may involve unconscious inferences as well. In the absence of further argument, we do not have sufficient evidence that there is a genuine asymmetry. So I do not regard this objection as a defeater to epistemic directness in the emergency room case.

Now let us take a third pass at the emergency room case and see if it satisfies the final desideratum – namely, privileged access. In a similar fashion, perhaps the best way to proceed would be to look for defeaters to this desideratum. What feature would the judgment “I am not in pain” in the emergency room case need to have in order to qualify as a defeater to privileged access? Well, since privileged access is cashed out, in part, by introspection, and since introspection, by definition, isn't causally mediated on the acquaintance model, it follows that any judgment that is the result of a causal process

would fail to satisfy this desideratum. So let's consider potential defeaters that fit this profile.

Perhaps the very fact that the doctor posed this question to you in the first place indirectly caused you to become aware that you are not in pain. If the doctor had not asked you this question, then you would not have paused for a moment, introspected on your current phenomenal state, and had gone on judge "I am not in pain". Do we thereby have a defeater to privileged access?

This objection fails because the mere fact that the doctor posed the question to you and the idea that it thereby caused you to judge "I am not in pain" would not be causally efficacious in the relevant sense. Instead, a genuine defeater to privileged access would have to arise from the introspective process itself. That is, the introspective process by which you come to your judgment would itself have to be causal in nature in order to qualify as a defeater to privileged access. Hence, this objection is not a defeater to privileged access.

You might object and say that judgments about phenomenal absences are causal in nature for another reason. Setting aside the emergency room case, perhaps you can think of some instances when you did come to believe that P, where P denotes some judgment about a phenomenal absence that did in fact arise through a process that is causal in nature. Moreover, setting aside your own experiences of negative phenomenal belief formation, perhaps you can imagine plenty of possible cases – alternatives to the emergency room case above – in which you might come to believe that P in virtue of a process that is causal in nature. Does the mere fact that you can enumerate such

examples provide conclusive evidence that all judgments about phenomenal absences involve a process that is causal in nature?

Not at all. The reason why is this. Acquaintance theorists claim that there is *some* knowledge that has the special features they seek to explain by positing the acquaintance relation. This does not, however, imply that *all* of your judgments about your mental states have these features. You could come to have beliefs about your mental states by some other means and be justified – but such judgments would not be justified by acquaintance. So those examples would fall outside the scope of the acquaintance theory. For the mere fact that there are instances of judgments about phenomenal absences with one set of features does not disprove the existence of judgments that do have the set of relevant features that acquaintance theorists are interested in. Hence, the objection above is not a defeater to privileged access either.

So now, you may ask, just because we have eliminated defeaters to privileged access, does that mean that we have positive evidence that the emergency room example satisfies this desideratum? I will concede that the absence of defeaters is not sufficient for determining conclusively that privileged access has been satisfied in this case. The fact that there is an absence of defeaters, however, strongly suggests that acquaintance-based judgments of phenomenal absences are possible. But, in order to strengthen our case, let us determine whether we have positive evidence that privileged access has been satisfied.

Since we purportedly have privileged access to certain sorts of mental states through the process of introspection, and we stand in this metaphysically direct, cognitive relation of acquaintance to those states, we have direct access to the truth-makers for our

judgments about our own mental states – i.e., the mental states themselves are the truth-makers for our judgments about them. And this applies, *prima facie*, to some judgments about phenomenal absences. For you have direct access to the fact that makes your judgment true, i.e., the fact that you are not in pain, because this fact about your own mental state is available to you within the vicinity of your introspective grasp.⁶ Conversely, you do not have the same privileged access to the truth-maker for your judgment about some object out in the world, as in the case of the judgment “the *apple* is not red”. The reason why is this. While you purportedly stand in this metaphysically direct relation of acquaintance to your mental state, you do not, conversely, stand in such a cognitive relation to the apple. So, we have some positive evidence that privileged access has been satisfied, in addition to the fact that we have vetted the case from potential defeaters to the desiderata.

⁶ Recall from note (5) that Fumerton (1995) and Bonjour (2003) establish the following as a necessary condition for justification: a subject must grasp that her judgment about her mental state corresponds to the fact that she is in that mental state. While it is controversial that such a rigorous condition is necessary for justification, if a subject does have introspective access to the fact that makes her negative phenomenal judgment true, this suggests that we have, at the very least, the raw materials needed to develop an explanatory account of justification for negative phenomenal beliefs. Let me clarify, however, that Bonjour and Fumerton do not explicitly (nor, it seems, implicitly) address the issue of judgments about phenomenal absences. Let me also clarify that it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for justification that applies to both positive and negative phenomenal beliefs.

3. A criterion of adequacy for acquaintance-based theories

In sections 1 and 2, I defended two premises and argued that some judgments about phenomenal absences have the special features we seek to explain by positing the acquaintance relation. So what is the upshot?

In this section, I explore two possibilities: either (i) acquaintance cannot explain why our judgments about our mental states have the special features that they do, or (ii) since our judgments about our mental states have these special features, a criterion of adequacy for any acquaintance-based theory is that it should allow us to be acquainted with phenomenal absences. I go on to pursue the latter.

Let's begin with the first option. It is possible that the acquaintance relation we posit cannot explain why our judgments about our own mental states have the special features that they do have. If this possibility turns out to be true, then the purpose for which we posit acquaintance—to explain such features—would fail to achieve its intended goal. As a result, the theory would be untenable and we would have to look at other theories of introspection to see whether they might have the resources to explain why our judgments about our own mental states have these special features.

Rather than rejecting the acquaintance theory wholesale, I think we should instead consider the possibility that how we formulate the acquaintance relation—and our account of justification—should be sufficiently broad so as not to rule out the possibility that we can be acquainted with phenomenal absences. Given this normative claim regarding how we ought to work out the acquaintance theory, we can identify versions of the acquaintance theory that do allow us to be acquainted with absences as having a particular theoretical virtue. Characterizations of acquaintance that do not allow us to be

acquainted with phenomenal absences have, conversely, a particular theoretical vice. So, I propose that we establish the following criterion of adequacy, for any acquaintance-based theory: that it allows us to be acquainted with phenomenal absences.

You might immediately object to this criterion of adequacy for the following reason. There is a plethora of absences given any phenomenal state that we'd have to account for if we were to establish this criterion of adequacy. For example, suppose that you are looking at a granny smith apple. You introspect on your experience of the apple and judge that phenomenal greenishness is present. Intuitively, it is plausible that we should give an account of what acquaintance comes to (including the justification of our judgments) in respect to phenomenal presences. For there is an apparent limit on the number of various qualities that are present given any current phenomenal state you are in. But, if we must allow for acquaintance with phenomenal absences in our theory, then we open the floodgates for a whole slew of absences we'd have to account for. For suppose you had judged, instead, that you were *not* having a reddish experience. While you may be inclined to think that your true belief about this fact (i.e., the fact that you are not having a reddish experience) is justified, there are tons of other phenomenal absences associated with your experience of the granny smith apple. The following qualities are also absent from your experience of that apple: bluishness, yellowishness, greyishness, orangishness, polka-dottedness, and so on. Moreover, it is also true that you are not experiencing every combination of those phenomenal absences: bluishness *and* yellowishness, yellowishness *and* greyishness, bluishness *and* yellowishness *and* greyishness, and so on. We would thus have the burden of accounting for an apparently endless supply of absences when we define what acquaintance comes to and the

conditions required for justification. Wouldn't it be ludicrous to require that our explanatory account apply to absences, given this consequence?

While you might think that this criterion of adequacy would be implausible on the grounds that it opens a Pandora's box, as it were, to a seemingly endless array of absences we'd have to account for, this consequence is not as problematic as it might appear, at first blush. For even in the case of phenomenal presences, the idea that we could ever be acquainted with all aspects of our phenomenal state at once is implausible. Even if you were to engage in introspection over a long period of time, there would seem to be a limit on the number of aspects that you could be acquainted with at any given moment. There are many qualities associated with our experiences, and the degree of complexity involved thus wouldn't seem to allow for acquaintance with every quality of our total phenomenal state at once. Rather, it seems that we could only be acquainted with a small number of features at a time. The same idea applies to phenomenal absences. It does not seem plausible that we could ever be acquainted with an entire slew of absences at once. Rather, if acquaintance with absences were possible, it would seem, in a similar vein to phenomenal presences, that we could only be acquainted with a few of these absences at a time.

Let me summarize the claims I have defended so far and clarify where we are at in the context of my general argument. In sections 1-2, I have defended these two claims:

- (1) We posit acquaintance to explain the special features of our judgments about our own mental states.
- (2) Our judgments about phenomenal absences have these special features.

And I have argued in section 3 that we should establish a criterion of adequacy, for any acquaintance-based theory: it should allow us to be acquainted with phenomenal

absences. In this next section, I explicate Gertler's (2001; 2011; 2012) take on acquaintance. In particular, I target her claim that, in the case of acquaintance-based knowledge, judgments are partly constituted by phenomenal reality and are thereby justified. I then underscore why this particular characterization of acquaintance does not allow us to be acquainted with phenomenal absences. Finally, I conclude that Gertler's take on acquaintance is inadequate since acquaintance, given her account, cannot perform the explanatory role that it's supposed to perform.

4. Constitution and Gertler's theory

While Gertler's characterization of acquaintance includes the definitive desiderata shared by contemporary acquaintance theories, her account is distinguished by the claim that acquaintance-based judgments are partly constituted by phenomenal reality itself: "...one's epistemic grasp of a bit of reality—a fact, event, or property—can be partly constituted by that reality itself." (Gertler 2012, 101).

Why think that the claim above is true? Before I raise my objection, I must first address this question, which will require some reconstruction, on my part, of Gertler's analysis of acquaintance-based knowledge. This analysis can be made more perspicuous by first providing glosses of the terms denoting the *relata* which apparently stand in this relation of partial constitution: namely, *phenomenal appearances*, *epistemic appearances*, and *phenomenal judgments* (Cf. Gertler, 2012, 104-109).

Let me begin with a gloss of the term 'phenomenal appearance'. Broadly, a phenomenal appearance is simply a way that your experience can be. More carefully, it is the felt quality or character of your experience of something, say, your visual experience of a red apple. Another way of cashing out your visual experience of the red apple is that you are having an appearance *as of* a red apple while introspecting. That you are having an appearance *as of* a red apple distinguishes your visual experience of the apple, which is immediately available to you through introspection, from the apple itself, which, as a physical object out in the world, falls outside the purview of introspection. Now, while you are attending to your visual experience of the red apple, you might notice that you are being appeared to in a way that is reddish in character. Your phenomenal appearance, then, is reddish. Moreover, phenomenal reddishness just is a particular aspect or part of

your experience, in this case. Phenomenal appearances can thus be simply cashed out as experiences.

Let me continue with a gloss of the term ‘epistemic appearance’. An epistemic appearance, in the context of introspection, can be cashed out as what you are inclined to believe about your experience while you are observing it. When you are paying attention to some aspect of your experience of the red apple, for example, you may be inclined to believe that it is reddish in character. So, in this case, your epistemic appearance may be the concept “reddish” that you deploy while attending to your current experience of phenomenal reddishness, or it may be the thought you are having about it – e.g., the thought that your experience has this reddish character.

Finally, a phenomenal judgment is simply a judgment about your current experience, e.g., “I am having this reddish experience”. While introspecting, your judgment is formed on the basis of your epistemic appearance when you grasp that your experience has the quality that you observe.

Now that we have glosses of the relevant terms, let me unpack Gertler’s claim that acquaintance-based judgments are partly constituted by phenomenal reality itself. (Note well that this claim, in particular, will be the target of my objection). On Gertler’s account of acquaintance-based belief-formation, epistemic appearances are *constituted* by phenomenal appearances (Gertler 2001; 2011, 112-117; 2012, 104-109). That is to say, when you deploy the concept ‘reddish’ or have the thought that your experience is reddish in character while you are attending to your experience (assuming that your thought about your experience is accurate), the content of that thought is partly constituted by phenomenal reality itself (i.e., your phenomenal appearance). Moreover,

this process of thought tokening, whereby the thought is partly constituted by the phenomenal appearance you are having, is achieved through the use of introspective demonstratives (Gertler 2012, 104-109). That is to say, your demonstrative attention to *this* property instantiated in you at the present moment picks out the property itself as its referent. So, when you deploy the phenomenal concept “reddish” or have the thought “*this* reddish property is instantiated in me now” while you are attending to the relevant phenomenal property in question, that phenomenal property itself is picked out as the referent of your thought. It thereby partly constitutes the content of the tokened thought. If you go on and judge “I am having *this* reddish experience”, then your phenomenal judgment is also partly constituted by phenomenal reality through the same mechanism – i.e., demonstrative attention.

This relation of constitution between phenomenal judgments and phenomenal reality can be cashed out as a ‘bottom-top’ explanation, as it were, of the *relata* which stand in this relation: First, my experience of something (e.g., my experience of the red apple) constitutes my phenomenal appearance (e.g., phenomenal reddishness).⁷ Second, this (reddish) phenomenal appearance partly constitutes my epistemic appearance (when I grasp that *this* reddish quality is instantiated in me now). Third, my epistemic appearance partly constitutes my phenomenal judgment “I am having *this* reddish experience”. Since these phenomenal judgments are formed on the basis of epistemic appearances, the introspective demonstrative that is a part of the judgment also picks out the same referent as that picked out in the epistemic appearance, namely, the experience itself (i.e., your

⁷ As you may recall from my earlier gloss, a phenomenal appearance is just another way of cashing out your experience – they are the same. So, it is stating the obvious to say that your phenomenal appearance is constituted by your experience. However, it is worth including this idea to get a full picture of how a phenomenal judgment can be partly constituted by phenomenal reality – i.e. your experience.

reddish phenomenal appearance or the phenomenal property you instantiate now). Moreover, the phenomenal judgment is also partly constituted by your experience in virtue of your demonstrative attention to it while introspecting. So, the result of this ‘bottom-up’ fleshing out, as it were, of the *relata* that stand in this relation of constitution, is that the judgment is partly constituted by phenomenal reality itself.

Moreover, the justifier of these judgments *just is* that bit of phenomenal reality that partly constitutes them: namely, conscious mental states (Gertler, 2012, 98-99). Since these judgments are thus directly tied to their truth-makers, i.e., these conscious mental states, they are more strongly justified than other types of judgments that are not directly tied to their truth-makers, e.g., perception-based judgments.⁸

While Gertler’s account thus provides an apparently attractive explanation of the epistemic justification of our positive phenomenal judgments, this explanation does not work, however, for negative phenomenal judgments. (These are beliefs of the type “I am *not* in pain” and “I am *not* having a greenish experience”.) This explanation does not work for negative phenomenal judgments for the following reason: an absence of something cannot even partly constitute something else. The implausibility of the idea can be underscored by a concrete example for *reductio*. In this example, we’ll assume, by hypothesis, that it is possible for absences to constitute something else. I will then consider a particular case that presupposes this claim. After closer consideration of the case, I’ll show that the particular absence cannot fulfill this role, contrary to our assumption. I will then conclude that absences cannot partly constitute something else.

⁸ Once again, a perception-based judgment, e.g., ‘the *apple* is red’ is not directly tied to its truth-maker because that truth-maker falls outside the purview of privileged, introspective access.

After I present this case, I will underscore why a phenomenal judgment cannot, likewise, be partly constituted by a phenomenal absence.

Suppose, for *reductio*, that absences partly constitute things. Consider, for example, an empty coffee pot. By hypothesis, we will assume that this coffee pot is partly constituted by an absence of coffee. If the hypothesis were true, then, by parity of reasoning, that same pot could be partly constituted by an absence of tea, an absence of milk, an absence of hot chocolate, and so on. But, it is impossible for a coffee pot to stand in a relation of constitution to all of these absences, even if it were merely a relation of partial constitution. For the following general principle would seem to apply: absences don't constitute things. Now, the implausibility of the notion that absences could constitute things is not motivated by a disagreement over a particular account of the nature of material constitution. For the sake of argument, I'll be maximally permissive and allow that any particular view of constitution that Gertler may have is true by assuming the broadest sense of this relation. In this broadest sense of material constitution, the proposition "A statue is constituted by some clay" is possibly true, while, conversely, the proposition "A statue is constituted by an absence of clay", is never true. (See Rea (1997) for an introduction to the puzzle of the statue and the clay.) Given this neutral assumption about material constitution, it follows that the coffee pot does not stand in a relation of material constitution – even partial constitution - to an absence of coffee or tea or hot chocolate, contrary to our assumption.

Now consider negative phenomenal judgments (e.g. "I am not having a greenish experience", or "I am not in pain"). Suppose you open your lunchbox and find a red delicious apple. While introspecting, you judge "I am not having a greenish experience".

Your judgment, in this case, seems to have the special features that acquaintance theorists seek to explain by positing acquaintance. That is to say, you don't use inference to judge that greenishness is absent – you come to believe that greenishness is absent by simply observing your experience directly. Moreover, what makes your judgment true – the fact your experience isn't greenish – is available to you within the vicinity of your privileged introspective access, in contrast to a judgment such as “the *apple* isn't green”.

Now assume further that Gertler's account of acquaintance is true: acquaintance-based judgments are partly constituted by phenomenal reality. Given this claim, is it possible that an absence of something, say, phenomenal greenishness, could partly constitute your judgment? We've already determined, more generally, that absences do not constitute things, given the broadest conception of material constitution. By parity of reasoning, it is impossible for an absence of something, say, phenomenal greenishness, to partly constitute your judgment “I am not having a greenish experience” because an absence of something cannot partly constitute anything, let alone your phenomenal judgment. (This also applies to negative judgments about pain: an absence of pain cannot partly constitute your judgment.) Hence, Gertler's take on acquaintance doesn't allow us to be acquainted with phenomenal absences.

My general argument is nearly complete. To summarize, I have defended three premises: (1) We posit acquaintance to explain the special features of our judgments about our own mental states; (2) Our judgments about phenomenal absences have these special features; (3) Gertler's take on acquaintance doesn't allow us to be acquainted with phenomenal absences.

From these three premises, it follows that Gertler's characterization of acquaintance is inadequate, since 'acquaintance', given her account, cannot perform the explanatory role that it's supposed to perform. I have summarized my general argument below for ease of reference:

- (1) We posit acquaintance to explain the special features of our judgments about our own mental states.
- (2) Our judgments about phenomenal absences have these special features.
- (3) Gertler's take on acquaintance doesn't allow us to be acquainted with phenomenal absences.

C: Hence, Gertler's take on acquaintance is inadequate since acquaintance, given her account, cannot perform the explanatory role that it's supposed to perform.

5. Conclusion

What is the general upshot of this argument? I have made a case for acquaintance-based judgments of phenomenal absences. And I have shown why an otherwise promising account of the epistemology of acquaintance fails. This suggests a general methodological lesson: when developing an account of the epistemology of acquaintance, we should make sure that we are capturing all of the relevant sorts of cases. While it remains inconclusive whether acquaintance with phenomenal absences is possible, I have shown that our judgments about them have the special features that are supposed to be explained by acquaintance. So, an adequate account of the epistemology of acquaintance should capture these sorts of cases as well.

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