

An Epistemic Theory of Acquaintance

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1 Setting Up the Questions

Examples

There seems to be an intuitive and philosophically important difference between:

- (1a) believing, for purely general reasons, that some mammals are squirrels
- (1b) believing some mammal in particular to be a squirrel

Likewise, there seems to be an intuitive and philosophically important difference between:

- (2a) believing, for purely general reasons, that the oldest mammal in town is a squirrel

For example, suppose you believe squirrels can live an extremely long time, like parrots and tortoises. You think to yourself, “The oldest mammal in this town is probably a squirrel.” Contrast that case to:

- (2b) believing some animal you see—an animal that *happens to be* the oldest mammal in town—to be a squirrel

I said there’s a philosophically important difference between the (a) examples and the (b) examples. In fact these examples illustrate more than one difference. Let’s try to disentangle the different differences.

Three Elements Present in Example (2b)

1. You’re in a position to demonstratively refer to the animal you see.
2. I’ve given a “de re” or **extensional report** of your belief $\stackrel{\text{def}}{=} \text{My speech-act licenses substitution and exportation (e.g., if the animal you see is my sister’s pet rat, I could equally well say you believe my sister’s pet rat to be a squirrel). My speech act isn’t trying to communicate anything about } *the way in which* \text{ your thought concerns the animal: e.g., whether you’re thinking about it by description, or if you are, what description you’re thinking of it under.}$

How epistemically intimate a connection do you need to an animal α , for an extensional report to be correct?

- Some theorists say such reports are correct when the subject’s thought **descriptively specifies** $\alpha \stackrel{\text{def}}{=} \text{it employs some descriptive condition (being the so-and-so) such that... [the subject knows that condition to be uniquely satisfied]... and } \alpha \text{ is what in fact uniquely satisfies it. (Quine, Chisholm, Sosa)}$
- Some theorists say the reports are correct only when the subject is **acquainted** in some way with α . (Russell, Burge, Kaplan in “Quantifying In,” Donnellan,

etc.) (Here “acquaintance” is just a dummy word for some more substantial account)

- Some theorists say the reports can be correct in *either* sort of case. (Kaplan in “Dthat,” Jeshion)
3. Your thought is “about,” or directed upon, the animal in a direct and intimate way. I’ll call it an **object-directed** thought $\stackrel{\text{def}}{=}$ by which I mean, at a first pass, that nobody would be *thinking the same thing* if they weren’t also thinking about that same object, in the same way.

Some theorists try to explain the intuitive differences between our examples *without* appealing to object-directed thoughts. E.g., some say that your thought in (2b) has just the same kind of content as your thought in (2a). Your thought isn’t object-directed in either case. (Chisholm, Sosa, Lewis, Kaplan in “Quantifying In”) Some theorists say all right, your thought in (2b) has a distinctive kind of content, but it’s not an object-directed content. (Burge, Segal) I’m going to ignore all those views, and just talk about theories that admit some kind of object-directed thought.

I think this notion is a pre-theoretical one. I don’t mean you’ll find kids in the schoolyard talking about object-directed beliefs, or saying things like, “No my dad believes *of* my sister’s boyfriend that he’s gay.” Of course no one talks that way until they’ve acquired some philosophical sophistication. When I say the notion is pre-theoretic I mean we understand it independently of (and epistemically prior to) accepting any worked-out theory of content.

- Some philosophers talk about: singular thoughts
These would *count as* object-directed thoughts, but I don’t want to assume at the start of our inquiry that object-directed thoughts are Millian instead of Fregean. I want the inquiry to remain as ecumenical as it can, for as long as it can.
- Some philosophers talk about: object-dependent thoughts $\stackrel{\text{def}}{=}$ there is an object x such that any world in which x does not exist is a world where the thought’s content doesn’t exist either, or at least is a world where the content cannot be entertained.

These thoughts would *count as* object-directed, too. But I don’t want to start out assuming that all object-directed thoughts succeed in having existing objects. Consider a case of unsuccessful demonstration: you hallucinate a squirrel, and you think to yourself “He [attempting to demonstrate the squirrel] must be cold.” What kind of thought are you thinking?

What are you thinking in cases of unsuccessful demonstration?

- (a) You have *no thought* with the logical form you’re aiming to have. You just have *an illusion* of doing so. You may succeed in having thoughts with *other* logical forms: e.g., the thought that *there is a* cold squirrel in front of you, the thought that *you see* a squirrel, etc.
- (b) You have a thought with the right logical form, but the thought is *defective* in that some of its argument positions are unfilled or “gappy”

- (c) You have a thought that's non-gappy and has the right logical form. It *seems* to be about a real flesh-and-blood squirrel; but in fact it's about a hallucinatory or imaginary or fictional squirrel.
 - (c1) such objects are existing abstracta
 - (c2) they are non-existing concreta, which despite not existing nonetheless actually have some properties

On views (b), (c1), and (c2), you do have a thought with the same logical form as people have when they successfully demonstrate squirrels. On views (b) and (c2), that thought does not have an existing object. But because it shares certain structural features with the successful thoughts, we may want to count it as “object-directed” too, even though it *fails* in its aim to be about an existing object.

To leave that theoretical possibility open, I will define an object-directed thought like this:

- A thought T is **object-directed** $\stackrel{\text{def}}{=}$
 - (i) If T *has* an object (even a non-existing object), then the thought of anyone who's thinking the same thing also has to be *about*, or directed towards, that object.

[There is an x —including non-existing x s, if there be such] T is about x & [All possible thought-tokens t] (the subject who's thinking t is thereby thinking-the-same-thing as the subject who's thinking $T \supset t$ is about x)
 - (ii) Thoughts *without* objects can also be object-directed, if they have the same structure. Such thoughts are precluded from *ever* having objects i.e., anyone else who's thinking the same thing has to be thinking a thought that has no object, too.

T has the same structure as a thought satisfying (i) & T has *no* object, & [All possible thought-tokens t] (thinking t is thinking-the-same-thing as thinking $T \supset t$ has no object).

So *that's* the notion I want to talk about.

The Questions

- One question we can ask is: *Why do we need* a notion of object-directed thought? What theoretical work does it do for us?

Why not go with the theorists like Chisholm, Burge, and so on, who try to explain the phenomena without it? That's an excellent question. I'm not going to try to answer it. (Action theory, intended reference) My discussion will take it for granted that *we do* want to employ the notion of an object-directed thought. I'll tackle the *remaining* two questions.
- When are we *in a position to have* this kind of thought?
- What is the relation between having an object-directed thought and the other two elements present in the examples I began with? That is, 1. being in a

position to demonstratively refer to an object, and 2. being such that some extensional report is true of you?

2 The Positions on the Field

When are we in a position to have object-directed thoughts?

- **Descriptivist Extreme:** being in a position to descriptively specify the object is enough (just use *dthat*, or introduce a descriptive name)
- Need acquaintance with the object.
How intimate a connection is that?
 - ⋮
 - **My Theory**
 - ⋮
 - Need to be currently perceiving the object
 - **Russell's Extreme:** a connection so intimate there can be no illusions of its obtaining

Three Arguments for the Descriptivist Extreme

1. Once we set aside the implausibly strict accounts of acquaintance, like Russell's, we have no simple unified account of what acquaintance amounts to.
2. We're more willing to make and accept extensional reports than any Acquaintance Theory would predict.
3. There are cases where you're not acquainted with α , but you're able to use and understand a term stipulated to demonstratively refer to whatever object meets some description, and α is that object.

Kaplan's *dthat*: *whenever* you can descriptively specify an object, that's enough to introduce and understand such a term.

More mundane cases: you know on general grounds that there's a picture behind you, and you're not acquainted with it. Seems like you can still say, and understand, things like: "That [pointing] is a picture I've never seen."

What I Will Do

1. I'll give a simple unified account of acquaintance.
2. I'll argue that the Argument from Extensional Reports is too powerful a weapon to serve the descriptivist's purposes.

What I mean is: it threatens to defeat *their position*, too, unless we find some way to limit its effect. But once we're able to limit its effect, the acquaintance theorist has little to fear from our lax attitudes towards extensional reports.

3. If I had time, I would argue that *we should* unhitch the ability to use and understand demonstrative terms from the ability to have object-directed thoughts about their referents.

Upshot: We have a pre-theoretic notion of object-directedness even though we don't have a non-technical word for it; and it's unclear whether there's any linguistic phenomenon that's specifically correlated with it. (At that point, I expect some of you to say, "Well then I don't know what we're talking about anymore." But I've also encountered so much *agreement* that there is a notion of this sort, that I'm confident there are some pre-theoretic intuitions I'm tapping into.) I want to discuss what it takes to be able to think thoughts that are object-directed in this pre-theoretic sense. (To a first approximation, we can do it when we perceive the object. What's interesting are the more careful, second and third approximations.)

3 My Simple Unified Account of Acquaintance

My strategy will be to explain acquaintance in terms of certain kinds of evidence, rather than in terms of certain kinds of causal relations. The kinds of evidence I'm talking about may very well involve causation...

Stage 1. Epistemic Theory of Acquaintance Consider the kinds of epistemic situations that (directly) justify object-directed thoughts you're *already* able to have. The way to get acquainted with a *new* object α is to get yourself into an epistemic situation of that kind, and thereby to acquire *prima facie justification* for some object-directed thought about α .

- I'll say your justification is **directed towards** $\alpha \stackrel{\text{def}}{=} \text{it prima facie justifies an object-directed thought about } \alpha$. For instance, if you see Rocky the Squirrel running across the snow, you'll have justification that's directed towards Rocky. (I'm *not* requiring that the experiences or other mental states that do the justifying *themselves* need to have object-directed contents. They may, or they may not. As you'll see in a moment, I don't want to take a stand on that.)
- The justification only needs to be prima facie. For instance, when you see Rocky running across the snow, you might *simultaneously* have evidence that justifies you, all things considered, in the false belief that you're hallucinating and there are no squirrels around. In this case, you wouldn't be all things considered justified in believing, about Rocky, that he's running across the snow or that he even exists. But on my account, your prima facie visual evidence still gives you the ability to think object-directed thoughts about Rocky.
- Once you *acquire* the ability to think object-directed thoughts about α , you can go on to think *whatever you like* about α . Those thoughts need not be supported, even in part, by the perceptual evidence that

enables you to think thoughts about α . They don't even need to be justified.

OK, that's the first step. But it's not clear how much progress we've made. We've just substituted for our original question *When are we in a position to have object-directed thoughts?* the new question *How do we come by object-directed justification?*

One way is by perception. There may be other ways (testimony), but I'm going to focus for now on perception.

Stage 2. Perceiving Objects and Perceiving Events

(1st try) Help myself to the relation: you *see an object* o ; and try to explain acquaintance in terms of it. This turns out to be unsatisfactory.

(2nd try) Help myself to the relation: you *see an event* e , and to facts about *what properties* your experience is representing to be instantiated.

Suppose it looks to you just as if you're seeing a brown squirrel. What is the representational content of your experience?

A theory can give your experience any of three *kinds* of representational content. Of course, theorists will also disagree about *which properties* get represented in experience; but to keep things simple I'm going to hold that fixed.

- an existential content $\exists x: x$ is a brown squirrel
- an unsaturated, predicative content—the content of “is a brown squirrel” .. $x: x$ is a brown squirrel
- an object-directed content  is a brown squirrel

What's common ground between these three views? They all say that your experience in *some* way presents the predicative content $x: x$ is a brown squirrel to you as being instantiated.

Your experience **predicates** being a brown squirrel $\stackrel{\text{def}}{=}$ it presents the predicative content $x: x$ is a brown squirrel to you as being instantiated.

Cases where your experience predicates a property, and *some object has* that property, but you don't perceive that object:

- a. you see a rock as a sheep; and a sheep happens to be hidden behind the rock
Here it's just luck that some object happens to have the property your experience predicates
- b. Rocky is moving about underneath a pile of leaves; and as you look at the pile, it's visibly obvious that some creature is moving underneath the leaves
Here there's an event which is α 's ϕ ing, and you *see that event*. You can see an event without seeing all of its participants, just as you can see an object without seeing every one of its parts. Moreover, you can see it *as* an event in which something ϕ s. Your experience presents the property $x: x$ is moving underneath the leaves to you as being instantiated. It predicates that property.

- c. you hear the scraping of a snow shovel; then you see snow being flung
Here your experience presents the property x : x is **shoveling snow** to you as being instantiated.
- d. you see one end of a rope pulled taut by an unseen weight
Here your experience presents the property x : x is **pulling the weight taut** to you as being instantiated.
- In all of these cases you don't perceive α , but plausibly you do perceive an event in which α ϕ s, and you perceive it *as* an event in which something ϕ s

You're perceptually aware of a ϕ ing as such $\stackrel{\text{def}}{=}$

- (i) there's an event e that is α 's ϕ ing
 - (ii) you perceive e
 - (iii) you perceive e *as* an event of something's ϕ ing—i.e., you perceive e *by* having an experience that predicates ϕ ing
 - (iv) you're thereby in a position to *perceptually recognize e as* an event of something's ϕ ing
- Conditions (i)-(iii) by themselves leave open the possibility of veridical misrecognition, e.g., if you saw a wedding as a wedding, but only because you were mistaking the priest for the groom, and a white pillar for the bride.
 - We can't just say "you perceive e , and thereby perceptually recognize e as..." because "perceptual recognition" on its own may incorporate inferential elements. Also, "perceptual recognition" implies belief; but I don't want the notion I'm employing to imply that. That's why I include "you're in a position to."

I rely on there being a difference between:

seeing something's ϕ ing *believing*, partly on the basis of
what you see, that something is ϕ ing

seeing an event *as* a door's just seeing the event as the door's *opening*
being opened by someone and *believing that* someone opened it
(your experience predicates
the relation of being opened by)

More cases of being perceptually aware of a ϕ ing as such, without perceiving the ϕ er:

- e. hearing an intruder's entering the house (by hearing the door open and shut)
- f. seeing George's smoking on the other side of the fence (by seeing the smoke, without seeing George)
- g. seeing a jet's moving across the sky (by seeing its vapor trail)
- h. can your experience predicate *historical properties*? e.g., can you see a rabbit's having left tracks in the snow?

Stage 3. Epistemology of Perception

- I've argued elsewhere for the view that any experience that predicates a property ϕ gives you (and *is enough all by itself* to give you) prima facie justification to believe **there's something** that has that property.

- Any experience in which you're perceptually aware of a ϕ ing as such, and α is the ϕ er, gives you prima facie justification to believe **an object-directed thought about α** , to the effect that *it* exists and has the relevant property.

Note: I'm not saying that the experience *itself* has an object-directed content.

It may, or it may not. I'm leaving that open in this discussion. We may want to say, instead, that experiences have non-object-directed contents, and that whether a given experience gives you object-directed justification is an *extrinsic* property of the experience. If you have it in the course of seeing Rocky, it will. If you have it in the course of hallucinating, it won't.

Actually, we need to be more cautious about hallucinations.

What Happens When You Hallucinate?

- Some views will say that just as fictions generate fictional objects, so too a hallucination generates a *hallucinatory* object. If so, then the hallucination predicates properties to, and enables you to think object-directed thoughts about, this hallucinatory object.
- Even if we dispense with fictional objects, some views will say that *some* hallucinations represent real objects, objects you're already able to think object-directed thoughts about: e.g., if you hallucinate hearing *your mother* calling your name, then the hallucination is representing your mother. If hallucinations can have that kind of content, then they can give us object-directed justification, too. (Your experience predicates properties *to* α , but you're not now perceptually aware of any event in which α is ϕ ing.) But they'd never be giving us justification about "new," non-hallucinatory objects.
- On most views, for most hallucinations, there will be no object (real or hallucinatory) that you're representing or predicating properties to. There just seems to be.

What's true on *all* the views? Maybe a hallucination can give you object-directed justification about a *hallucinatory* object. Or maybe it can give you object-directed justification about an "old" object, an object you're already acquainted with. But it will never give you object-directed justification about a "new," non-hallucinatory object.

So now I've made a start at answering the first argument against Acquaintance Theories: I've sketched a simple unified account of what Acquaintance amounts to, that's more liberal than implausibly extreme views like Russell's. I've only talked about *perception*. I think the account I'm sketching can be applied in much the same way to *testimony* too. (You hear about a's ϕ ing *as* a ϕ ing.) But there are some special difficulties there. We'll have to discuss them another time.

4 Extensional Reports

My account is more liberal than Russell's, but the Descriptivist will argue that it's still too conservative. He'll argue that: We're more willing to make and accept extensional reports than *any* Acquaintance Theory would predict. Sometimes we make extensional reports when *the only* way a subject is connected to the relevant object is by descriptively specifying it.

My reply: I think that's right. Sometimes the only way a subject is connected to the relevant object is by descriptively specifying it. But let's not stop there. If we keep looking, we'll find that in fact, we're *even laxer* in our willingness to make and accept extensional reports than *Descriptivism* would predict.

Many times the subject won't be able to *descriptively specify* the relevant object, either.

- Landlord George buys several apartment buildings and decides to evict all the tenants. He hasn't yet met, or had dealings with, any of the tenants. He hasn't even seen their names. I can say to my sister Kristen, who's one of his tenants: "George wants to evict you." I can also say to you: "George wants to evict my sister"—even though George isn't acquainted with my sister, hasn't heard her name, and isn't in a position to descriptively specify her. She's just one of 100s of tenants.
- A music professor says to a dark, crowded auditorium: "I want all the sisters here tonight to clap on the third beat..." My sister and her husband were listening to their iPods. They unplug the earphones and ask, "What's going on?" Someone sitting nearby tells my sister: "He wants you to clap on the third beat." Or tells her husband: "He wants your wife to clap on the third beat"—even though, as in the previous example, the professor is not acquainted with my sister and isn't in a position to descriptively specify her.
- My sister and her friends come across a cave containing a pirate's hidden treasure horde. She's talking to me on her cellphone when she spots an obvious booby trap: "Oh come on, did the pirate really think *I* was going to fall for *that*?" My sister and her friends grab the treasure and escape. I reflect: "It looks like that was the only trap. I guess the pirate *did* think my sister would fall for it."

These extensional reports sound perfectly natural to me. But I take it that *no one* will want to say that Landlord George, the music professor, and the pirate had object-directed thoughts about my sister.

Lesson: Our willingness to make and accept extensional reports is no good guide to whether the subject has an object-directed thought.

- (i) This may be because an extensional report can be true of you *without* your having the corresponding object-directed thought. If so, then the behavior of Extensional Reports won't provide any argument against (nor for) an account of object-directed thought.

(ii) Or it may be because there are systematic mechanisms that make reports like these pragmatically appropriate even though they're false. If so, then the same mechanisms can be invoked to explain away reports that seem to favor Descriptivism over Acquaintance Theories.

- My sister is *traveling alone* when she discovers the treasure horde. The pirate has rigged the cave so that the first person who tries to steal his treasure will be the last. The entranceway is a narrow tunnel, only one person can get through at a time, then the tunnel closes forever. So he knew in advance that *at most one* person would ever try to take the treasure. He also knew that *at least one* person would try to take his treasure. We know all that. As before, my sister spots the traps easily, and says to me on her cellphone: "Did the pirate really think *I* was going to fall for *that*?" She gets away through a separate exit, and I reflect: "I guess he *did* think she would fall for it."

In the previous case, the pirate wasn't able to descriptively specify my sister. She was just one of several thieves who were stealing his treasure. In this case, the pirate knows there will be one and only one thief, and we know that he knows it. So we know he *is* able to think thoughts that descriptively specify my sister. But it looks to me like whatever mechanisms are explaining the appropriateness of the extensional report in the first case are explaining it in this case, too. The fact that the pirate can descriptively specify my sister in the second case *feels* to me like an extraneous detail.