

We are acquainted with ourselves

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Abstract I am aware of the rain outside, but only in virtue of looking at a weather report. I am aware of my friend, but only because I hear her voice through my phone. Thus, there are some things that I'm aware of, but only *indirectly*. Many philosophers believe that there are also some things of which I am *directly* aware (i.e., *acquainted*). The most plausible candidates are experiences such as pains, tickles, visual sensations, etc. In fact, the philosophical consensus seems to be that experiences are the *only* plausible candidates for acquaintance. But I will argue that we are also acquainted with *ourselves*. After outlining what it means to be acquainted with oneself, I will introduce, develop, and defend a commonly used test for acquaintance. Then I will apply this test to us and show that we pass. I will consider various objections to my argument. But ultimately I will conclude that we can be, and often are, acquainted with ourselves.

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Many philosophers believe that there are also some things of which I am *directly* aware (i.e., *acquainted*). The most plausible candidates are experiences such as pains, tickles, visual sensations, etc. In fact, the philosophical consensus seems to be that experiences are the *only* plausible candidates for acquaintance.

But I will argue that we are also acquainted with *ourselves*. After outlining what it means to be acquainted with oneself, I will introduce, develop, and defend a

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1 Self-acquaintance

Here is the claim that I will defend:

SELF-ACQUAINTANCE: People can be (and often are) acquainted with themselves.

Let me explain. First, my understanding of *acquaintance* comes from Russell (1912). He characterizes the notion of acquaintance as follows:

We shall say that we have *acquaintance* with anything of which we are directly aware, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths (p. 73).

One is acquainted with something if and only if one is *directly aware* of it. Consider an example. Suppose I discover that it's raining outside by looking at a weather report. I am aware of the rain, but only indirectly. For I am only aware of the rain in virtue of being aware of something else—namely, the weather report. Now suppose that I go outside, see the rain, hear it pattering on the ground, and feel its droplets on my skin. Am I now directly aware of the rain? Not according to Russell (1912).¹ For, on his view, I am aware of the rain only in virtue of being aware of my *experiences* of the rain.² My rain-experiences are really what I am acquainted with. And this seems right. It seems right that I can be aware of my visual experience of the rain, for example, without there being anything that mediates my awareness of that experience. It seems that I can be aware of the experience *itself*.

The notion of 'directness' in play here has both *metaphysical* and *epistemic* elements (cf., Gertler 2012). There is a metaphysical element in that the relation of awareness I bear to an object of acquaintance is not mediated by any distinct entity or causal process. This differs from *indirect* relations such as the one I bear to the rain when I look at a weather report. The rain causes someone to note that it's raining, which causes there to be a weather report, which then causes me to be aware of the rain. This causal process involving various entities mediates my awareness of the rain. But no such process mediates my awareness of my *experiences* of the rain. My experiences are of course caused to exist. But once they exist, no extra causal process is needed to establish my relation to them as something of which I am aware.

¹ Direct realists, such as McDowell (1994), Martin (2002), and Hinton (1973), might disagree here because they claim that we can be directly aware of external objects. But my point here is not to dismiss direct realism. So direct realists can just ignore this part of my exposition.

² Russell thinks that it's *sense data* that we are acquainted with. Here I use 'experience' as a neutral term that could, depending on one's view, refer to phenomenal properties, experiential events, sense data, etc. For detailed accounts of the acquaintance theory as applied to experiences, see Gertler (2011, 2012), Chalmers (2003), Feldman (2004), and Fumerton (1995).

There is an *epistemic* directness here as well. If one is acquainted with some *x*, then one can form beliefs about *x* the justification of which depends only on one's awareness of *x* (cf., Gertler 2012, p. 93). For example, I can form justified beliefs about my experiences of the rain just by being aware of those experiences. There is nothing else that I must be aware of in order for those beliefs to be justified. So my knowledge of my rain experiences can be direct in this way.³ In contrast, when I form a belief about the rain via my awareness of a weather report or my rain experiences, for example, the justification for my belief will depend, at least in part, on my awareness of something other than the rain—namely, the weather report or my rain experiences. Hence, I do not have direct epistemic access to the rain in the same way that I have direct epistemic access to my rain experiences.

One implication of this epistemic directness is that beliefs formed on the basis of acquaintance will typically enjoy a relatively high level of justification. If a belief about *x* is based solely on one's direct awareness of *x*, then this belief will usually be more strongly justified than a belief about *x* that is based on one's awareness of other things besides *x* itself. For example, if I believe that I am in pain because I am directly aware of my pain, then this belief will be more strongly justified than it would have been if it were based on my looking at a brain scan or observing my own behavior. I will return to some of these issues in the next section. For now I just want to point out that beliefs formed on the basis of acquaintance appear to have a relatively high degree of epistemic justification.

Thus far I have focused on acquaintance with *experiences*, since they are generally considered to be the most plausible candidates for things we can be acquainted with. However, what I am really interested in here is *self-acquaintance*. So let's return to that topic. Here's what Russell (1912) says about it:

When a case of acquaintance is one with which I can be acquainted ... it is plain that the person acquainted is myself. Thus, when I am acquainted with my seeing the sun, the whole fact with which I am acquainted is 'Self-acquainted-with-sense-datum'. Further, we know the truth 'I am acquainted with this sense-datum'. It is hard to see how we could know this truth, or even understand what is meant by it, unless we were acquainted with something we call 'I'. It does not seem necessary to suppose that we are acquainted with a more or less permanent person, the same today as yesterday, but it does seem as though we must be acquainted with that thing, whatever its nature, which sees the sun and has acquaintance with sense-data. Thus, in some sense it would seem we must be acquainted with our Selves as opposed to our particular experiences (pp. 79–80).

Russell (1912) likes the idea that we are acquainted with ourselves. But he doesn't say much else about self-acquaintance. And he also admits that the issue is

³ Russell (1912) thinks that acquaintance with something *automatically* yields knowledge of that thing (p. 73). Most contemporary acquaintance theorists disagree; they think that one must also conceptualize and think about objects of acquaintance in order to know things about them (see Chalmers 2003; Gertler 2011, p. 49). I won't pick a side here. If one's being acquainted with something doesn't automatically yield knowledge of that thing, then it at least puts one *in a position* to gain knowledge about that thing.

“difficult” and that “although acquaintance with ourselves seems *probably* to occur, it is not wise to assert that it undoubtedly does occur” (p. 80). Perhaps this is good advice. For few have found the notion of self-acquaintance very appealing.⁴

Nonetheless, I assert that self-acquaintance occurs. And now I can say more about what I am asserting. When I say that people can be (and often are) acquainted with themselves, I mean that they can be *directly aware* of themselves in Russell’s sense. I mean that people can be aware of themselves, and not in virtue of being aware of anything else, such as thoughts, behavior, testimony, descriptions, brain scans, etc. I mean that one can be non-inferentially aware of one’s self. And so one can come to *know* certain things about oneself—e.g., that one exists, that one is in pain, etc.—by forming beliefs about oneself on the basis of self-acquaintance.

SELF-ACQUAINTANCE is most naturally understood as an *introspective* thesis about self-awareness. The idea is that one is acquainted with oneself in roughly the same way that one is acquainted with one’s experiences. However, this isn’t strictly implied by SELF-ACQUAINTANCE. And some may wish to go a different direction.⁵ So I’ll just say that the most natural way to understand self-acquaintance is as a kind of introspective self-awareness. My claim, however, is just that we can be (and often are) directly aware of ourselves.

This puts SELF-ACQUAINTANCE at odds with various accounts of self-awareness, including those that say we can be introspectively aware of ourselves only *indirectly*—in virtue of being aware of our mental states (see, e.g., Howell 2006). I of course don’t deny that we *can* be aware of ourselves indirectly. After all, I can be aware of myself by looking in a mirror, wiggling my toes, or indeed, by attending to my mental states. But what SELF-ACQUAINTANCE denies is that self-awareness is *always* achieved via intermediaries.

So SELF-ACQUAINTANCE is at odds with various accounts of self-awareness. But it is almost completely neutral with respect to *ontological* accounts of the self. We should not assume that our direct awareness of ourselves yields some profound ontological insight into our underlying nature. I do assume that selves exist, and I do talk about selves as the *subjects* of their experiences. But that’s as far as I will go here.

Finally, I suggest that self-acquaintance can occur without any great act of attention. Acquaintance with the self is like acquaintance with experiences in this regard. We can be acquainted with our experiences without focusing on or consciously attending to them. And the same goes for the self. Most of the time we

⁴ Howell (2006), for example, says (without argument as if it’s obvious), “There is no acquaintance with the self or with any sort of conceptual/representational stand-in for the self” (p. 45–46; see also, Grice 2008, pp. 79–80; Hume and David 1739/1975, Chap. IV. p. 6; Ryle and Gilbert 1949/2002; and Armstrong 1968. See Kripke 2011, p. 319, for a rare expression of dissent.). But perhaps even more notable than quotes like this is the absence of fully developed acquaintances theories of self-awareness in the literature.

⁵ For instance, some philosophers (e.g., Shoemaker) have argued that our most *basic* form of self-awareness couldn’t rely on introspective self-identification. I’ve not given an account of basic self-awareness here. But still, if one wanted to develop SELF-ACQUAINTANCE into an introspective account of basic self-awareness one would have to deal with the aforementioned concerns. For what it’s worth, I believe that one could succeed in doing this.

are simply aware of ourselves in the same effortless way that we are aware of our pains, itches, smells, and tastes.⁶ But even so, SELF-ACQUAINTANCE doesn't say that we are *always* acquainted with ourselves. Sleep, injury, coma, drugs, and (maybe) mental disorder can prevent self-acquaintance. Perhaps even a powerful distraction could do it. So SELF-ACQUAINTANCE just says that we *can be* acquainted with ourselves, and that *often*—in many normal, waking circumstances—we are self-acquainted. That's my claim.

2 The Doubt test

At this point I'll assume that we can be acquainted with at least some of our experiences. Our goal here is to determine whether our acquaintance with things extends *beyond* experiences to the self. So we need a way of doing that.

Russell (1912) is again our help in time of need. He offers a test for determining whether one is acquainted with something. He introduces this test by considering a table sitting in front of him. Russell says that although he is directly aware of his experiences that “make up the appearance” of this table, his awareness of the table itself is a different story:

My knowledge of the table as a physical object, on the contrary, is not direct knowledge. Such as it is, it is obtained through acquaintance with the sense-data that make up the appearance of the table. We have seen that it is possible, without absurdity, to doubt whether there is a table at all, whereas it is not possible to doubt the sense-data (p. 74).

Here Russell seems to be suggesting that one can determine whether one is acquainted with something by considering whether one can (without absurdity) doubt that it exists. Russell can doubt that his table exists—perhaps by entertaining some skeptical scenario. So he says that he isn't acquainted with his table. But Russell cannot doubt that his *experiences* of the table exist. So he concludes that he is acquainted with those experiences. This suggests the following test: If one cannot doubt the existence of something that one seems to be aware of, then one is acquainted with that thing.⁷ Hence, Russell is acquainted with his experiences of his table. We can run this test on my earlier example as well: I can doubt that the rain exists by entertaining some skeptical hypothesis. I can suppose that an evil demon is tricking me about the rain. But I cannot doubt that my *experiences* of the rain exist. Even an evil demon couldn't trick me about *that*. So Russell's test—what I'll call

⁶ Kriegel (2004) draws a helpful distinction between *focal* self-awareness and *peripheral* self-awareness. Focal awareness of something (including the self) requires attention, but peripheral awareness does not.

⁷ Notice that Russell's (1912) version of The Doubt Test appears to have a *bi-conditional* form according to which one is acquainted with something if *and only if* one cannot doubt that it exists. However, all that I need for my purposes (and, as will become clear below, the claim that other philosophers focus on) is the conditional that if one cannot doubt the existence of something that one seems to be aware of, then one is acquainted with that thing. So that conditional is what I will focus on here and in what follows.

‘The Doubt Test’—delivers the results that I am acquainted with my rain-experiences.

Russell doesn’t explain why The Doubt Test is a good test for acquaintance. But the reason is fairly straightforward. If I am aware of some *x*, but only in virtue of being aware of some distinct *y* that indicates *x*’s existence, then I can doubt that *y* is a faithful witness to the existence of *x*. If a weather report says it’s raining, then I can doubt that there is rain because I can doubt that the weather report got it right. Or if I see a tree in the distance, then I can doubt that the tree exists by noting that my visual experience is blurry or even by supposing that an evil demon is deceiving me. So if I *cannot* doubt that *x* exists, it must be that I am *directly* aware of *x* itself rather than some potentially false or misleading presentation of *x* that would allow me to doubt its existence. When I experience a sharp pain, for instance, and cannot doubt that it exists, I must be directly aware of that pain.

The Doubt Test has a distinguished history going back even before Russell at least as far as Descartes.⁸ Many philosophers have used the test. In the last century it has been used rather often. For example, Price (1932) uses The Doubt Test while looking at a tomato (p. 3). Price says that when he looks at a tomato there are many things about the tomato (including that it exists) that he can doubt. But he says that he cannot doubt that his *experiences* of the tomato exist and are the way they seem to be. These reflections then lead Price to conclude that his experiences of the tomato are “directly present” or “given” to his consciousness (*ibid.*).

Lewis (1946) appeals to The Doubt Test in a more general form. He says:

Subtract in what we say that we see, or hear, or otherwise learn from direct experience, all that conceivably could be mistaken; the remainder is the given content of the experience inducing this belief (p. 182).

More recently, Gertler (2012) carries on the tradition of appealing to The Doubt Test. She asks her readers to pinch themselves and then to carefully attend to their experiences. She then says:

When I try this, I find it nearly impossible to doubt that my experience has a certain phenomenal quality—the phenomenal quality it epistemically seems to me to have, when I focus my attention on the experience. Since this is so difficult to doubt, my grasp of the phenomenal property seems not to derive from background assumptions which I could suspend; e.g., that the experience is caused by an action of pinching. It seems to derive entirely from the experience itself. If that is correct, my judgment registering the relevant aspect of how things epistemically seem to me (this phenomenal property is

⁸ Fumerton (1995), who is among those who use The Doubt Test to support an acquaintance theory, speaks to the history of the test as well as to its connection to Descartes, saying, “... many classical foundationalists sought to identify the objects of direct acquaintance by stripping from experience all that is clearly not before consciousness. One does this through something resembling a Cartesian method of doubt” (p. 123; see also Gertler 2011, Chap. 4). These foundationalists include Descartes (1643/1993), Malebranche (1674/1997), and, more recently, Russell (1912), Price (1932), Lewis (1946), Chisholm (1957, Chap. 5), and Bonjour (1999).

instantiated) is directly tied to the phenomenal reality that is its truthmaker (pp. 104–105).

Here we see a more modest version of The Doubt Test. Gertler (2012) somewhat cautiously says that she finds it “nearly impossible” to doubt that a certain quality is instantiated in her experience. She then uses this result to support her claim that she is acquainted with that aspect of her experience.⁹

Chalmers (1996, Chap. 5) takes a similar line. He argues that acquaintance is required for certainty, where by ‘certainty’ he means one’s ability to remove all doubt, including doubts generated by skeptical scenarios. Chalmers then claims that we can at least sometimes be certain of our experiences, and so he concludes that sometimes we can be acquainted with our experiences. Here once again there’s an inference from lack of doubt to acquaintance, which is the inference sanctioned by The Doubt Test.

The Doubt Test also crops up in less obvious forms. For instance, Balog (2012) argues that her acquaintance theory can explain why it seems to us that some judgments about our experiences can’t be *overridden* (p. 23). One plausible way to interpret Balog is as saying that the reason we sometimes cannot doubt that we are experiencing what we are experiencing is because we are acquainted with our experiences. Thus, Balog appears to be offering the indubitability of our experiential beliefs as evidence for our acquaintance with our experiences. Again, The Doubt Test appears to be at work.¹⁰

Clearly The Doubt Test is, and has been, a commonly used test for acquaintance. But what isn’t so clear is how exactly to understand The Doubt Test. In fact, it’s even unclear whether all those who appeal to The Doubt Test have the same exact version of the test in mind. So some clarification is in order. In the remainder of this section I will try to explicate the core features of The Doubt Test. Although I cannot speak for everyone, I hope to capture the spirit of The Doubt Test in its most plausible form.

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

The Doubt Test is also limited in that it is exclusively concerned with one’s ability to doubt the existence of something that one is, or at least seems to be, *aware of*. One may be unable to doubt other kinds of things, like the truth of a fact such as

⁹ Gertler (2012) explicitly acknowledges that she is appealing to Russell’s “Doubt Test” (pp. 94, 104). Other contemporary acquaintance theorists who appeal to The Doubt Test, or something very near to it, include Fumerton (1995), Feldman (2004) and Chalmers (1996, Chap. 5, 2003). And others who appeal to something like The Doubt Test, but not necessarily in defense of an acquaintance theory, include Hamilton (1860, Chap. XV, p. 188), Brentano (1973), Ayer (1956), Ewing (1980, Chap. 5), Malcom (1975), Alston (1971), Bonjour (1999), Chisholm (1957, Chap. 5), Anscombe (1994), and O’Brien (2007, Chap. 2).

¹⁰ Arguments along these lines are everywhere in the literature on acquaintance and “the given” (see, e.g., Chisholm (1957, Chap. 5), Bonjour (1985), Langsam (2002), Gertler (2011, 2012), Fumerton (1995), Feldman (2004), and Chalmers (1996, Chap. 5, 2003). So if I am right to suggest that this line of reasoning is connected to The Doubt Test, then use of The Doubt Test is extremely widespread.

$2 + 2 = 4$. But that's different from being unable to doubt the existence of a certain something one seems to be aware of. One might claim to be aware of the *proposition* that $2 + 2 = 4$ or the *number* 2. So The Doubt Test might be applied to propositions or numbers in that one might consider whether one can doubt the *existence* of such things.¹¹ But that's another matter. That one cannot doubt that $2 + 2 = 4$ is true doesn't mean that one is aware of a particular entity whose existence one cannot doubt. This distinction between (de re) awareness *of* something and (de dicto) awareness *that* such-and-such is the case parallels Russell's (1912) own distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description. And so, as one might expect, The Doubt Test only applies to potential objects of acquaintance—to things one is, or at least seems to be, aware *of*, whose existence one may or may not be able to doubt.

As for what it means to *doubt* something, those who use The Doubt Test are typically interested in certain *psychological* and/or *epistemic* dimensions of doubt. If one cannot doubt *psychologically* that some x exists, then one is maximally convinced that x exists and so will be unwilling to give up the belief that x exists. This is the dimension of doubt that Gertler (2012) seems to appeal to when she says that it's nearly impossible for her to doubt that her pain exists. No matter how hard she tries to doubt her pain, she can't do it. Her confidence is unshakable. This is one plausible way to think about the kind of doubt that bears on The Doubt Test. But we must exercise caution here. Since different people have different temperaments, we should not expect universal agreement as to what can be doubted psychologically. Some people may be able to doubt that their experiences exist. But many of the rest of us find this idea ludicrous. We could just ignore the outliers. Or we could be more modest and just say that we each have to decide for ourselves whether we can doubt psychologically that some x exists. This second option strikes me as the wisest course for now. If on the basis of your seeming awareness of some x you find it impossible, or perhaps nearly impossible (if you have an especially cautious temperament), to bring yourself to doubt that x exists, then, by your lights, x passes what we might call 'The *Psychological* Doubt Test'. This may not yield perfect agreement. But it's one plausible way to understand the kind of doubt involved with The Doubt Test.

Another way to understand this doubt is as being *epistemic* in nature. Here the idea is that if one cannot doubt (epistemically) that x exists, then one's belief that x exists has a very high level—perhaps the highest level—of epistemic justification. Some might say that the belief in question is *infallible*. However, even among acquaintance theorists who endorse The Doubt Test there is much disagreement as to whether any of our beliefs are ever infallible. In fact, there is even disagreement

¹¹ Most contemporary philosophers would probably agree that abstracta like propositions or numbers *fail* The Doubt Test. For even ardent realists about propositions or numbers will probably admit that they can *doubt* that such things exist. But if one insists that one *cannot* doubt that propositions or numbers exist, then I think one should (and likely would) embrace the conclusion that one is acquainted with such things. And if one wants to go even further and insist that one cannot doubt the existence of an entity like "the *truth*" that $2 + 2 = 4$, where a "truth" is different from a proposition because not all propositions are true, then, again, one should embrace the conclusion that one is acquainted with such an entity.

as to what it would take for a belief to be infallible (see Reed 2002). We should avoid these controversies if we can. Perhaps a better way to understand epistemic doubt is in terms of *incorrigibility*. Following Alston (1971) and Reed (2002), a belief is incorrigible just in case its epistemic justification cannot be overturned. This more closely approximates what I take to be the epistemic dimension of doubt. Yet, there is again a question of how best to understand incorrigibility. And spelling out what it takes to *overturn* epistemic justification may prove tricky. So, again, we should avoid these controversies if we can.

And we can. We can think of the epistemic dimension of doubt as *immunity to skepticism* (Cf., Chalmers 1996, 2003). This offers a particularly clear way to get a grip on epistemic doubt, and it fits well with how The Doubt Test has historically been used. The idea is this: If given one's seeming awareness of *x* one can rule out (a priori) all skeptical scenarios in which *x* does not exist, then *x* passes what we might call 'The Epistemic Doubt Test'.¹² There is a very intuitive understanding of this idea that has been present throughout our discussion. We've seen that Russell's table, Price's tomato, and the rain in front of me are susceptible to skeptical scenarios, perhaps involving evil demons or hallucinations; but each of our *experiences* aren't susceptible to such scenarios. Consider the rain example. Right now it seems to me that I am aware of both the rain and my experiences of the rain. But, given the way things seem to me, I cannot rule out all skeptical scenarios in which the rain does not exist. I could be a brain in a vat. Then things might seem to me as they do even though it's not actually raining. On the other hand, I *can* rule out all skeptical scenarios in which my *experiences* of the rain don't exist. For no evil demon or computer could make it *seem* to me like my rain-experiences exist, as it now does, without also bringing it about that my rain-experiences *do*, in fact, exist.¹³ After all, those very experiences constitute part of the way things seem to me.¹³ Thus, given the way things seem to me, I can rule out all skeptical scenarios in which my rain-experiences don't exist. Therefore, my rain-experiences pass The Epistemic Doubt Test, but the rain does not.

This can be captured more formally through appeal to a framework in which epistemic possibilities are conceived as centered epistemically possible worlds

¹² Just to be clear: I am not suggesting that one must be able to know that *x* exists *purely a priori*, or that one must be able to rule out *purely a priori* all skeptical scenarios in which *x* does not exist, in order for *x* to pass The Epistemic Doubt Test. Rather, I am suggesting that one must be able to rule these skeptical scenarios out a priori *given one's seeming awareness of x* (which is plausibly *a posteriori*). So take the way things seem to one (including one's seeming awareness of *x*) and ask: Given this information, can one rule out a priori all skeptical scenarios in which *x* does not exist? If so, then *x* passes The Epistemic Doubt Test. Another way to put it is that there is no skeptical scenario in which things seem to one exactly as they do and in which one's belief that *x* exists is false. This is what I mean (and will continue to mean) when I say that one can "rule out" all of the relevant skeptical scenarios.

¹³ Here's how Chalmers (1996) puts it: "In the case of perceptual knowledge, for example, one can construct a case in which the reliable connection is absent—a case where the subject is a brain in the vat, say—and everything will still seem the same to the subject. Nothing about the subject's core epistemic situation rules this scenario out. But in the case of consciousness, one cannot construct these skeptical hypotheses. Our core epistemic situation already includes our conscious experience. There is no situation in which everything seems just the same to us but in which we are not conscious, as our conscious experience is (at least partly) constitutive of the way things seem" (p. 195).

(considered as actual). Take a world w , considered as actual, centered on an individual and a time. We can use the rain example and suppose that w is centered on me at t , where t is a time at which it seems to me to be raining. Now consider the class of worlds centered on me at t that are epistemically possible *given how it seems to me at t* . These are the worlds that, given my core epistemic situation at t , I cannot rule out a priori as being w (assuming that I am an ideal rational agent). Here we should not think of my “core epistemic situation” as being constituted by what I *know* at t . What I know may depend on factors independent of me that I cannot readily detect. So what I know at t will differ from world to world. My core epistemic situation might be understood as constituted by the content of my experiences at t . This is one way to understand “how things seem to me at t ”, and it accords with how skeptical scenarios are usually set up (Cf., Chalmers 1996, p. 195). But we should not simply assume this, lest we beg any important questions. Perhaps for now the best way to understand my core epistemic situation is as being constituted by the information that is available to me from my perspective, setting aside any empirical background knowledge that I may have about the world. Or, alternatively, it may be understood as constituted by the information that is available to me *even if I turn out to be a brain in a vat*. With that said, consider two beliefs: (R) The rain exists, and (E) My experiences of the rain exist. Among the worlds that are possible given my core epistemic situation, there will be worlds in which R is true and worlds in which R is false. For there will be worlds in which my core epistemic situation is what it is and the rain really exists, and worlds in which my core epistemic situation is what it is but the rain does *not* exist (because I am a brain in a vat, say). E, on the other hand, will be true in every epistemically possible world that centers on me at t . For every world in which my core epistemic situation is what it is will be a world in which I am undergoing rain-experiences. Thus, we might say that, given my core epistemic situation, E is epistemically necessary, but R is epistemically contingent.¹⁴ Or, to put it another way: E is certain, but R is not. Or, to put it in a way that best fits with our current discussion: E cannot be doubted, but R can. This is just a sketch.¹⁵ And it may not be helpful for everyone. So some may choose to ignore it. But what I’ve tried to show is that understanding the epistemic dimension of doubt in terms of immunity to skepticism can be developed within a familiar—and, to my mind, useful—formal framework.

Let’s recap. The Doubt Test is a first-personal test for acquaintance that centers on one’s ability to doubt the existence of something that one seems to be aware of. This test has two versions. The first version—The Psychological Doubt Test—concerns the degree to which one is convinced of something’s existence. The second version of the test—The Epistemic Doubt Test—can be understood in terms of immunity to skepticism. Now, given that we now have two versions of The Doubt Test in play, we have some options. We could treat each version of the test as an

¹⁴ This of course is not to say that E is epistemically necessary (or a priori) *simpliciter*. Rather, it’s just to say that E is epistemically necessary *given my core epistemic situation*. In other words, E is true in every epistemically possible world in which my core epistemic situation is what it is.

¹⁵ This sketch is based on the two-dimensional frameworks developed by Chalmers (2006) and Jackson (1998).

independent test for acquaintance. Then we might say that if some x passes *either* version of the test, then one has reason to believe that one is acquainted with x . Alternatively, we could combine the two versions of the test and say that if x passes *both* versions of the test, then one is acquainted with x . Or, if one version of the test is deemed superior to the other, then we may just focus on that version. There is perhaps something to be said for each of these options. But I want to play it safe. So when I appeal to The Doubt Test in what follows, I will explicitly consider each version of the test, and I will use ‘The Doubt Test’ to refer to this relatively demanding conjunctive version of the test:

The Doubt Test: If it seems to S that she is aware of some x , and on the basis of that seeming awareness S cannot doubt (psychologically) that x exists, and S can rule out all skeptical scenarios in which x does not exist, then S is acquainted with x .

So although I believe that *each* version of the test gives some indication of whether one is acquainted with some x , I will say that x has to pass *both* versions of the test in order to pass The Doubt Test.¹⁶ This yields what seems to be a good, safe test for acquaintance. It doesn’t admit of any obvious exceptions, and it is backed by the plausible justification given above. Again, the idea is that if I am aware of some x , but only in virtue of being aware of some distinct y that indicates x ’s existence, then I can doubt (both psychologically and epistemically) that y is a faithful witness to the existence of x ; thus, if I *cannot* doubt (psychologically or epistemically) that x exists, then I must be *directly* aware of x *itself* rather than some potentially misleading presentation of x that would allow me to doubt its existence.¹⁷ In addition to this justification, The Doubt Test also has a certain intuitive appeal. This is evidenced by the fact that a wide variety of philosophers over the past few centuries have freely and confidently used the test. Thus, although I will consider some objections to The Doubt Test in the next section, I assume that it has enough credibility to warrant our moving on.

3 The Doubt test and self-acquaintance

Let’s return to our main topic: *self*-acquaintance. We are now in a position to apply The Doubt Test to ourselves. Do we pass? I will argue that we do indeed pass The

¹⁶ Again, this is not the only plausible approach to The Doubt Test. If you prefer one version of the test to the other, then feel free to understand The Doubt Test strictly along those lines. My arguments will be unaffected.

¹⁷ Not everyone who uses The Doubt Test explains the rationale for the test. But those who do typically give the rationale just described. Gertler (2012), for example, points out that her awareness of the table before her is mediated by a causal process, and then she says, “the presence of this mediating factor enables me to doubt the existence of the table, since I can recognize that, for all I know, my visual experience has an aberrant cause” (p. 94). However, this is not the case, according to Gertler, when she is confronted with the phenomenal reality of her pain experiences—she cannot doubt the existence of these experiences because she is directly aware of them (p. 104). Also see Price (1932, pp. 7–12) and Chalmers (1996, pp. 195–196; 2003, p. 34).

Doubt Test. Thus, I will argue that SELF-ACQUAINTANCE is true—we can be acquainted with ourselves.

3.1 Here's my argument

- (1) If we pass The Doubt Test, then we are acquainted with ourselves.
- (2) We pass The Doubt Test.
- (3) Therefore, SELF-ACQUAINTANCE is true.

This argument is valid. So let's consider the truth of its premises, starting with (2). I can report that *I*, at least, cannot doubt that I exist. I am maximally convinced that I exist—I couldn't be convinced otherwise—and my belief that I exist is immune to skepticism. So I pass The Doubt Test. And since I am not an exceptional case, I assume that you and everyone else pass The Doubt Test too. So (2) appears to be true.

At first this seems like an obvious result. Indeed, few philosophers have professed an ability to doubt their own existence (at least in print).¹⁸ But, to be fair, some philosophers may find themselves unable to doubt their own existence only because they recognize that doing so would be absurd for purely logical or conceptual reasons. The way Descartes (1643/1993) puts it is that one has to exist in order to doubt something. So, necessarily, if one doubts one's own existence, then one exists. Hence, it's absurd to doubt one's own existence.¹⁹ Another way of getting at the point is to say that 'I exist' is *self-verifying*. By rule, 'I' refers to the person who thinks (or says) it. So whenever 'I exist' is thought, it must be true, since its thinker has to exist in order to think it. Thus, there is something absurd about the thought 'I do not exist'. These points may make (2) seem less obvious. For if it's not our *awareness* of ourselves that renders us unable to doubt our own existence, then it is inappropriate to appeal to The Doubt Test here. One has to be aware of *x* in order for *x* to pass The Doubt Test (Sect. 2). So if one's inability to doubt one's own existence has nothing to do with self-awareness, then (2) remains unaddressed.²⁰

¹⁸ Hume (1739/1975), Unger (1979), and Sider (2013) are philosophers who have doubted their own existences. Billon (2014) argues that the self-doubt expressed by those who suffer from Cotard's Delusion or Depersonalization Disorder may also be rational. But I will not take up that debate here.

¹⁹ Some Descartes scholars deny that Descartes ever meant to express an inability to doubt his own existence for these purely logical reasons. They contend that his expressed inability to doubt his own existence is, in every instance, an expression of the more robust apprehension of his own existence discussed below. For helpful discussions of these issues, see Hintikka (1962), Secada (2000, Chap. 5), and Williams (1978, Chap. 3).

²⁰ One might initially suspect that one's inability to doubt one's own existence for these logical reasons actually casts doubt on (1)—on the legitimacy of The Doubt Test—since one's inability to doubt one's existence in this way doesn't imply that one is acquainted with oneself. But, remember, The Doubt Test is only concerned with one's ability to doubt the existence of something on the basis of one's *awareness* of it (Sect. 2). So, just as The Doubt Test simply does not apply to one's inability to doubt that '2 + 2 = 4' is true (see Sect. 2), so too The Doubt Test does not apply to one's inability to doubt that 'I exist' is true for logical reasons that have nothing to do with self-awareness.

What we need to do here is set aside the logical barriers to self-doubt just mentioned and ask ourselves whether, *on the basis of self-awareness*, we pass The Doubt Test. Here I assume, along with most other philosophers, that we have a basic form of self-awareness—a form of awareness that is usually (if not always) present when one thinks ‘I exist’—that makes us fit to be tested by The Doubt Test.²¹ So I, for example, can attend to myself and ask whether I can doubt that *this* person that I am aware of exists. But perhaps it is misleading to talk only of my *inability to doubt* my existence here. For this puts the point in purely negative terms (as a *lack* of an ability), when in fact a positive cognitive achievement is at stake. We might instead put the question thus: Am I *certain* of my existence? And this is quite separate from the question of whether it would be absurd, for logical reasons, to assent to ‘I do not exist’. I might know that it would be absurd for anyone to say or think ‘I do not exist’ without ever actually considering my own existence. So I could think it absurd on purely logical grounds to deny that I exist without actually being *certain* that I exist, or indeed, without believing anything at all about myself. And, conversely, I could at least consider whether I am certain that I exist without ever realizing that it is absurd, for logical reasons, to assent to ‘I do not exist’. This shows that what’s at stake here both goes beyond and is independent of my recognition of the logical peculiarities of doubting my own existence. And that’s where The Doubt Test comes in.

So let’s look more carefully at (2), beginning with The Psychological Doubt Test. The best way that I know of to assess this version of the test is to engage in self-reflection. Here I follow Descartes’ lead (1643/1993). Descartes sits down in a comfortable place, frees himself of distractions, and then asks himself what he can and cannot doubt. Eventually Descartes comes around to thinking about his own existence. First he seems to note that he is unable to doubt his own existence for the logical reasons mentioned above (though, see fn. 19). Then he goes further, saying, “I am; I exist—this is certain ... it is obvious that it is I who doubt, I who understand, and I who will, that there is nothing by which it could be explained more clearly” (*Med.*, Chap. II, pp. 27–29). When he introspects, Descartes discovers himself thinking. And on the basis of this discovery, he finds himself unable to doubt (psychologically, at least) his own existence. Thus, by his own lights, Descartes passes The Psychological Doubt Test.

Now you try. Pause for a moment, close your eyes, attempt to clear your mind of all distractions, and ask yourself: Can I doubt that I exist? Given the way things seem to me right now, can I bring myself to doubt that *this* person exists? Or, to put it another way: Can I doubt that *these* experiences—*these* thoughts, sensations, emotions, and feelings—are *my* experiences? Can I doubt that I am their subject?

I, like Descartes, find that I cannot doubt my own existence. I just can’t do it, at least not in good faith. And I take it, though I don’t know for sure, that most other people agree. A few people apparently disagree (see fn. 18). And I find this incredible, much like I find doubting one’s own experiences incredible. However, I

²¹ For particularly helpful discussions on this topic, see O’Brien (2007), Howell (2006), and Gertler (2011, Chap. 7).

will simply reiterate that we each have to decide for ourselves what we can doubt (psychologically). So I will leave it up to you to decide whether you pass The Psychological Doubt Test.

Let's move on to The Epistemic Doubt Test. Here the question is: Is my belief that I exist, or your belief that you exist, immune to skepticism? And the answer is: Yes, it is. An evil demon could be tricking me about all sorts of things, but it couldn't be tricking me about my own existence. One barrier to skepticism about my own existence is, again, purely logical. An evil demon couldn't trick *me* into falsely believing that I exist, since I have to exist in order to be tricked. But, again, this isn't relevant for our purposes. We need to bracket this purely logical barrier to skepticism. We need to ask whether, on the basis of my self-awareness, I can rule out all skeptical scenarios in which I do not exist. And the answer is still: Yes. There is no skeptical scenario in which things seem as they do now *here*, in *this* core epistemic situation, but in which I am absent. One might be tempted to think that there are skeptical scenarios in which I am mistaken—that is, scenarios in which it seems as if I exist and am experiencing various things, but in which I do not actually exist. But a little reflection eases this temptation. For a little reflection reveals the absurdity in the idea that I might not be the one who is occupying this particular mental perspective that I seem to be occupying right now. The issue isn't with the idea of another person (or no one at all) undergoing experiences that are qualitatively similar or even identical to my experiences. The issue is with the idea that someone else (or no one at all) might turn out to be the one occupying *this* particular perspective and undergoing *these* particular experiences that I seem to be undergoing right now. That's what seems absurd. We might put the point by saying that I am *built into* my perspective (hence 'the first-person perspective'), or that my perspective *depends on me*.²² The crucial point is this: I am inseparable from my perspective and the way things seem from my perspective. So there is no skeptical scenario in which things seem as they do *here* and yet in which I do not exist.

Consider the point from a slightly different angle. Suppose that, right now, I have a sharp pain in my knee. This pain is part of the way things seem to me right now. But it's not just that *pain* is part of the way things seem to me right now. Rather, it's *my pain*—it seems to me that *I* am the one hurting. And, as many philosophers have been careful to point out, if it seems to me that I am the one in pain, then *I am* the one in pain.²³ Even an evil demon couldn't trick me about *that*. Thus, given the way things seem to me right now, I can rule out any skeptical scenario in which I am not in pain. So I can rule out any skeptical scenario in which I do not exist. Thus, my belief that I exist is immune to skepticism.

All of this can be captured within the formal framework mentioned earlier. Consider my belief (M) I exist. Since 'I' refers to me, and all of my epistemically possible worlds are centered on me, M comes out trivially true in every world. But we can bracket this trivial truth (as above) by conceiving of epistemically possible

²² This, at least, is how some philosophers put the point. See, for example, Shoemaker (1968), Baker (2000), Nagel (1986), and O'Brien (2007).

²³ See, for example, Shoemaker (1968), O'Brien (2007), Evans (2001), Howell (2006), Cassam (1994), Gertler (2011, pp. 215–217), and McGinn (1983).

worlds as centered, not on a particular *individual*, but rather, on a particular *core epistemic situation*, which again is constituted by the information available from a particular perspective—in this case, the particular perspective that I happen to occupy at *t*—setting aside background empirical information about the world. This way we do not prejudge whether the same person exists in every world. So take a world *w*, considered as actual, centered on *q* at *t*, where *q* is the core epistemic situation that I happen to be in at *t*. Now consider *M*. *M* is true in every epistemically possible world centered on *q* at *t*. For I am an essential part of *q*. Thus, any world centered on *q* at *t* is a world in which I exist at *t*. We can see this especially clearly by considering my pain *P* at *t*. *P* partly constitutes *q* at *t*. So there is no epistemically possible world centered on *q* at *t* in which *P* does not exist. And, again, it's not just that *P* is *someone's* pain. Rather, *q* is such that *P* is manifestly *my* pain. So *P* is my pain in every epistemically possible world centered on *q* at *t*. So I exist in every such world. Thus, given *q*, *M* is epistemically necessary. It is certain. It is beyond doubt (epistemically). In other words, my belief that I exist is immune to skepticism.

Again, there are lots of things I can doubt (epistemically). But my existence is not one of them. So I pass The Epistemic Doubt Test. And I am not an exceptional case. So I assume that we each pass. This, together with the (hopefully well-founded) assumption that we each also pass The Psychological Doubt Test, means that we pass The Doubt Test. So I therefore conclude that (2) is true.

With that, let's move on to (1). I have already said my piece about The Doubt Test *in general*. So I will not consider objections that reject The Doubt Test wholesale. Anyone who denies that The Doubt Test is *ever* a good test for acquaintance will most likely deny that we can be acquainted with anything, including our experiences. And it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider this position.²⁴ So what I want to do in the remainder of this paper is address those who agree that The Doubt Test is a good test for acquaintance with experiences, but who are less optimistic about it being a good test for acquaintance with the self.

One reason one might think The Doubt Test works especially for experiences is because experiences are exactly as they appear to be. As Russell (1912) puts it, he can know one of his experiences “perfectly and completely”, and so “no further knowledge of it itself is even theoretically possible” (pp. 73–74). One might adopt this position and then point out that the self is different—its properties go beyond the way it appears. So one might argue that our partial self-awareness is insufficient to warrant an appeal to The Doubt Test.

I grant that there are important differences between experiences and the self. And, of course, there is more to the self than what we are aware of. But none of this is relevant here. Remember why The Doubt Test is a good test. If I am aware of some *x*, but only in virtue of being aware of some distinct *y* that indicates *x*'s existence, then I can doubt that *y* is a faithful witness to the existence of *x*. Thus, if I cannot doubt that *x* exists, then I am directly aware of *x* itself rather than some

²⁴ However, even those who are skeptical about acquaintance should see that The Doubt Test reveals a key asymmetry in our awareness of things. We can doubt the existence of some things, but not others. Why? I suggest that it's because we are directly aware of the latter, but not the former.

potentially misleading presentation of *x* that would allow me to doubt its existence. That's why The Doubt Test is a good test. And that has nothing to do with whether or not *x* has some properties of which I am unaware. I can be directly aware of something without being aware of all of its properties. One might point out that we can be aware of the *essence* of an experience, which is arguably not the case when it comes to the self. But, again, this is not relevant here. I can be directly aware of something without being aware of its essence. So, while I grant that the differences between experiences and the self are very important *in general*, I deny that they are relevant in the present context.

A related concern might be that, whereas with experiences there is no gap between appearance and reality—between how an experience *seems* and how it *is*—with the self there is such a gap. Here the point isn't that the self has hidden properties; rather, it's that the properties of the self that we actually do seem to be aware of could be misleading in a way that the properties of experiences couldn't be misleading. Maybe this difference could be exploited to argue that The Doubt Test works for experiences but not for the self.

The problem is, there is no such difference. Sure, we might be misled about some aspects of the self. But then, the same goes for experiences. The pain in my knee seems worse than it was yesterday. My red visual sensation appears to be caused by a book on my desk. These appearances may be misleading. After all, I'm not acquainted with past pains or the book on my desk. So, even with experiences, the lack of appearance/reality gap is limited. And that's precisely how it is with the self, too. There are aspects of ourselves that we are not acquainted with. So a gap between appearance and reality emerges. But this isn't the case with *every* aspect of the self. As we've seen, there is no appearance/reality gap between my seeming to be the subject of a particular mental state and my actually being the subject of that state. Given that a particular pain exists, if it seems to me that it is my pain, then it *is* my pain. More generally, there is no gap between my seeming to occupy a certain perspective and my actually occupying that perspective. If it seems to me that *these* are my experiences and *this* is my point of view, then *these are* my experiences and *this is* my point of view. So, upon further reflection, the apparent asymmetry between experiences and the self dissolves.

One last concern might be that The Doubt Test works especially for experiences because experiences are *introspectable*. One might follow Hume (1739/1975) in thinking that because the self is not an item of experience, it is not introspectable. So then one might worry that The Doubt Test doesn't work for the self.

Again, this potential difference isn't relevant. All that matters in terms of the above rationale for The Doubt Test is that we are *aware* of the thing to be tested. So all that matters here is that we are aware of ourselves in some way. Nearly all philosophers rightly accept that we are. And this includes many who agree with Hume about self-experience (see, e.g., Howell 2006). So, once again, there is no relevant disanalogy between experiences and the self. For, in both cases, we are aware of the thing in question.

Now, for what it's worth, I think Hume is wrong. I think we *do* have self-experiences. So I think we *can* be introspectively aware of ourselves. And, indeed, I think that this is part of the best explanation for our self-acquaintance. So I think

that the truth of SELF-ACQUAINTANCE is one good reason (among others) to reject Hume's claim about self-experience.²⁵ However, all of this goes beyond what I've argued for in this paper. For SELF-ACQUAINTANCE just says that we are directly aware of ourselves. It doesn't say *how* (see Sect. 1). So what's important for my present purposes is just that both experiences and the self are fit to be tested by The Doubt Test because they are both things of which we are aware.

Indeed, it seems that anything that can be said about experiences that is relevant for our purposes can also be said about the self. If The Doubt Test is a good test for acquaintance with experiences, then it is a good test for acquaintance with the self. And since at this point I assume that The Doubt Test *is* a good test for acquaintance with experiences, I conclude that it's a good test for acquaintance with the self. Thus, I conclude that (1) is true. Again, (2) is also true—the self passes The Doubt Test. And my argument is valid. So I conclude that we can be acquainted with ourselves. SELF-ACQUAINTANCE is true.

4 Conclusion

SELF-ACQUAINTANCE is a substantive thesis about the nature of self-awareness. However, it is also a somewhat limited thesis. For it doesn't say what role self-acquaintance plays with regard to broader issues such as those having to do with self-reference, indexicals, I-thoughts, action, and so on. So a lot more needs to be said if SELF-ACQUAINTANCE is to become a fully formed account of basic self-awareness. I believe that it can be developed into such an account. But that will have to wait for another day.

For now, let's focus on the progress that has been made. In this paper I have shown that a widely used, widely appreciated, and quite plausible method for determining whether one is acquainted with something—namely, The Doubt Test—can be extended beyond experiences to the self. So anyone who believes on the basis of this method that we can be acquainted with our experiences should also believe that we can be acquainted with ourselves. Furthermore, even those not yet wise in the ways of acquaintance have a reason to get on board. For The Doubt Test is an intuitive and well-supported test for acquaintance. So it gives us all reason to think that we can be acquainted with both our experiences and ourselves.

Some may still find the idea of self-acquaintance odd, perplexing, or difficult to get a grip on. But given my rather limited claims about what we can learn about ourselves through self-acquaintance, this idea shouldn't be any more perplexing than everyday self-reference and self-ascription. In referring to ourselves, and in ascribing thoughts, feelings, emotions, sensations, and actions to ourselves, we assume that we are beings capable of thinking and undergoing experiences. My

²⁵ To my mind, the best reason to reject Hume's claim about self-experience derives from research on various mental disorders, such as schizophrenia, depersonalization disorder, and Cotard's syndrome, that suggests that we normally have self-experiences. For helpful discussions of these issues see, for example, Bayne and Pacherie (2007), Stephens and Graham (2000), and Billon (2014).

suggestion is that we don't need to *assume* these things. We are directly aware of them. And that doesn't seem so odd.

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