

Perceptually Secured Knowledge

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Abstract: Perceptually secured knowledge consists of beliefs that amount to knowledge just because they are based on suitable perceptual states. Relationism about the ground of perceptually secured knowledge is the view that if a perceptual state can make a belief based on it amount to knowledge, then it can do that because it constitutes an appropriate kind of relational state, e.g., a state of perceptual acquaintance. I explore the prospects of both maintaining that some beliefs amount to perceptually secured knowledge and developing a relationist account of their ground.

Skeptics aside, everyone agrees that we have perceptual knowledge. Here is an example: I know that a seen pepper is red. Call this the good case.

One thing we might say about the good case is that in it I have a belief that amounts to knowledge because of how it results from perception. This gloss doesn't go beyond what's required to identify the case as one of perceptual knowledge. In this paper I am concerned with a more controversial description of the case. According to the more controversial description of the good case, I have a belief that amounts to knowledge just because it is based on a suitable perceptual state. This gloss does go beyond what's required to identify the case as one of perceptual knowledge. It implies that my belief stands in a basing relation to one of my perceptual states and that it is because it does so that my belief amounts to knowledge that the seen pepper is red.

By perceptually secured knowledge I mean beliefs that amount to knowledge because they are based on suitable perceptual states. Suppose the knowledge I gain in the good case is perceptually secured knowledge. This raises an explanatory question. If a perceptual state makes a belief based on it amount to knowledge, then that state must have some features in virtue of which it does this. The explanatory question asks what these features are. An answer to the question specifies the ground of perceptually secured knowledge.

The aim of this paper is to explore the prospects of a kind of relationism about the ground of perceptually secured knowledge. The basic idea is that if a perceptual state can make beliefs based on it amount to knowledge, then it can do so because it includes awareness of a truth-maker for its content. The perceptual state is such that anyone in it thereby stands in an awareness relation to a truth-maker for its content.

Here is the plan. To judge whether an account of perceptually secured knowledge succeeds in its ambitions, we need some desiderata any such account must meet. In (§1), I suggest three conditions on what the ground of perceptually secured knowledge should be like. These are motivated by comparing our good case with a variety of bad cases. Such comparisons, however, can also be seen as putting pressure on the very idea of perceptually secured knowledge. The section closes with a discussion of this worry. In (§2), I introduce a relationist view of the ground of perceptually secured knowledge that is derived from Russell's acquaintance theoretic account of self-evidence. This view, which I'll call [Russellian Relationism], easily accommodates the first of the three conditions identified in (§1). It does not accommodate the other two conditions. In (§3), I introduce a slight variant, [Modified

Relationism], and I explore some reasons for thinking that it can accommodate all three conditions while also discharging its explanatory obligations in phenomenologically and empirically credible ways.

1. Theoretical Desiderata

To evaluate proposals about the ground of perceptually secured knowledge, we need theoretical desiderata. What conditions must a perceptual state meet in order to make a belief based on it amount to knowledge? One way to approach this question is to contrast our good case—in which I know that a seen pepper is red—with a variety of bad cases in which I form a perceptual belief that fails to amount to knowledge.

The most familiar variety of bad case is the illusory bad case:

The market is out of red peppers. They installed red lights over a row of yellow peppers to make it look like a row of red peppers, hoping most shoppers won't notice. I'm such a shopper. What looks to me like a red pepper is really a yellow pepper under red lighting. My belief that the seen pepper is red is false and does not amount to knowledge.

The illusory bad case shows that the ground of perceptually secured knowledge must meet the condition of being factive:

Factive. If a perceptual state makes your belief that p based on it amount to knowledge, then it constitutes a basis for believing that p incompatible with your belief that p being false.

As we'll see, the thorniest issues for giving an account of the ground of perceptually secured knowledge derive from conditions distinct from the condition of being factive. These other conditions are motivated by non-illusory bad cases. Non-illusory bad cases feature veridical perceptions that occur in unfavorable epistemically circumstances.

Circumstances might be epistemically unfavorable because of the larger environment within which veridical perception occurs, as in cases of environmental luck:

The market is short on red peppers. They insert the few remaining red peppers in a row of mostly yellow peppers and install red lights where necessary to make it look like a full row of red peppers. I happen to look at one of the genuinely red peppers under normal illumination. What looks to me like a red pepper really is a red pepper. Though it happens to be true, my belief that the seen pepper is red could too easily have been false and does not amount to knowledge.

The perceptual state in the case of environmental luck shows that the ground of perceptually secured knowledge must meet the condition of being safe:

Safe. If a perceptual state makes your belief that p based on it amount to knowledge, then it constitutes a basis for believing that p incompatible with your belief that p being true by luck.

Veridical perceptions do not just occur within larger environments, however. They occur within contexts of other mental states, and these can also make for bad cases. The additional ways for circumstances to be epistemically unfavorable depend on what else is running through my mind when I have a veridical perception.

For example, my environment might be normal, but I might have misleading evidence that it is not. This is a case of epistemic defeat:

The market is now well stocked with red peppers. I vividly recall being fooled by red lights installed over a row of yellow peppers in the past. I notice a shifty store manager with a bundle of red lights. Without good reason to discount the defeating evidence of memory and circumstance, when I see one of the red peppers, I form the belief that it is red anyway. My belief that the seen pepper is red is irrational and does not amount to knowledge.

The perceptual state in the case of epistemic defeat shows that the ground of perceptually secured knowledge must meet the condition of being undefeated:

Undefeated. If a perceptual state makes your belief that p based on it amount to knowledge, then it constitutes a basis for believing that p incompatible with your belief that p being unjustified because epistemically defeated.

These are all the bad cases I'll consider. We have the case of illusion, the case of environmental luck, and the case of epistemic defeat. In each of these cases I form a perceptual belief that a seen pepper is red which fails to amount to knowledge. Together they show that an account of the ground of perceptually secured knowledge must identify a perceptual state that meets the conditions of being factive, safe, and undefeated.

On further reflection, however, one might think the bad cases show something else, namely that there really is no such thing as perceptually secured knowledge. There is a familiar pattern of reasoning, which I'll call good case/bad case reasoning, that puts pressure on the idea that perceptual states can make beliefs based on them amount to knowledge. One might develop three different bits of good case/bad case reasoning, each proceeding by reflection on one of the three varieties of bad case. A virtue of this approach is that it makes explicit how proponents of perceptually secured knowledge have the option of endorsing a different response to each of the bits of good case/bad case reasoning in turn. For present purposes, however, I'm going to roll everything into one argument. The motivation for this is that the relationist view to be considered here is joined to a unified diagnosis of what would go wrong in any of the more limited forms of good case/bad case reasoning. This is part of its attraction.

The good case/bad case reasoning proceeds as follows:

Step 1. In each of the bad cases, my perceptual state does not make my belief based on it amount to knowledge.

Step 2. My perceptual state in the good case constitutes the same basis for belief as do my perceptual states in the bad cases.

Step 3. So, in the good case, my perceptual state does not make my belief based on it amount to knowledge.

If the argument is sound, then, while there might be perceptual knowledge in some sense, there is no perceptually secured knowledge in the sense of beliefs that amount to knowledge just because they are based on suitable perceptual states.

The response to the good case/bad case reasoning I adopt in this paper is to deny Step 2.¹ This response is associated with disjunctivism. Maybe the view I'll defend counts as one or another form of disjunctivism that has been distinguished in the literature (see Soteriou 2020 for a survey). Here I want to distance my response from two alternative disjunctivist responses to the argument which I reject.

First, one might argue that my perceptual state in the good case constitutes a basis for belief that is different from the bases constituted by my perceptual states in the bad cases in virtue of its phenomenology. According to some disjunctivists, the phenomenal character of my perceptual state in the good case is individuated in a way that prevents its instantiation in the bad cases (cf. Campbell 2002). This is the sort of disjunctivism required by the first way of denying Step 2 which I reject.

Second, one might argue that my perceptual state in the good case constitutes a basis for belief that is different from the bases constituted by my perceptual states in the bad cases in virtue of the way it contributes to justification. According to some disjunctivists, my perceptual state in the good case makes a contribution to what I am justified in believing that is individuated in a way that prevents its instantiation in the bad cases (cf. Pritchard 2012). This is the sort of disjunctivism required by the second way of denying Step 2 which I reject. It differs from the first sort of disjunctivism because it leaves open the possibility that the phenomenal character of my perceptual state in the good case also occurs in some of the bad cases.

While rejecting Step 2, I want to leave it open that both the phenomenal character of, and the contribution to justification made by, my perceptual state in the good case can also occur in some of the bad cases. For example, I think that in the illusory bad case my perceptual phenomenology and my perceptual justification are exactly the same as what they are in the good case. I'm attracted to the view that the perceptual justification is the same *because* the perceptual phenomenology is the same, but I am not relying on that further thesis here.

The reason I reject Step 2 in the good case/bad case reasoning is this. My perceptual state in the good case constitutes a basis for belief that is different from the bases constituted

¹ In (Chudnoff 2011, 2013) I develop an alternative response to some limited forms of good case/bad case reasoning. According to the alternative response, the reasoning is invalid because it assumes what has come to be called "necessitarianism about grounding," i.e., roughly, the view that if P fully grounds Q, then P necessitates Q. I remain skeptical about necessitarianism, but do not think a defense of perceptually secured knowledge must rest on its denial. See (Bliss and Trogdon 2021) section 4.1 for a survey of the relevant metaphysical issues.

by my perceptual states in the bad cases in virtue of its individual nature.² The perceptual state is an occurrence, token, instance, particular, or individual with various characteristics aside from its phenomenology and the contribution it makes to justification. Some of these are both essential to its being the individual perceptual state that it is and relevant to whether beliefs based on it amount to knowledge. And it is not true that all of them also occur in some of the bad cases. Of course, it is trivially true that the good case differs from each of the bad cases in epistemically relevant ways. For example, there must be features in the good case that ensure my belief is veridical, safe, and undefeated. It is not trivially true, however, that these features are part of my basis for belief and are essential characteristics making up the individual nature of my perceptual state. It is this non-trivial claim that I am giving as a reason for rejecting Step 2 in the good case/bad case reasoning.

The natural question to ask at this point is, what is the individual nature of the perceptual state in the good case such that it can make beliefs based on it amount to knowledge? This is the question that an account of the ground of perceptually secured knowledge answers. So, I think evaluating the viability of perceptually secured knowledge is inseparable from evaluating specific accounts of its ground. I pursue that task in the next two sections.

2. Russellian Relationism

According to relationism about the ground of perceptually secured knowledge, if a perceptual state can make beliefs based on it amount to knowledge, then it can do so because it is a certain kind of relation. A version of relationism can be traced back to Russell's acquaintance theoretic account of self-evidence, most fully developed in his 1913 manuscript *Theory of Knowledge*. I use this account as a point of departure.

First, I'll discuss the relation of acquaintance, which, like Russell circa 1913, I identify with awareness. Second, I'll consider an account of the ground of perceptually secured knowledge that is adapted from Russell's view of self-evidence. Inadequacies in it motivate an alternative pursued in the next section.

Acquaintance is a two-place relation between a subject and an object. Since there are many two-place relations between subjects and objects, acquaintance theorists rely on a mix of examples and stipulations to specify exactly which such relation acquaintance is. I adopt three stipulations from Russell's discussions of acquaintance: (i) acquaintance is a form of consciousness; (ii) acquaintance enables original reference; (iii) acquaintance is attributive. I discuss each in turn.

(i) Acquaintance is a form of consciousness. If a subject is acquainted with an object, then that subject is thereby conscious of that object. In *Problems of Philosophy*, Russell suggested that acquaintance is a direct form of a more general form of consciousness that also

² Other writers have singled out the individual natures of perceptual states for theoretical purposes. (Burge 2005) distinguishes ability-general perceptual representation from ability-particular perceptual representation and accords ability-particular perceptual representation a special role in fixing perceptual reference. (Schellenberg 2016) distinguishes perceptual content types from perceptual content tokens and accords the perceptual content tokens a special role in constituting factive evidence. In this respect our views are similar, though there are also a number of differences I leave unexplored here.

has indirect forms: there is awareness in general; acquaintance is *direct* awareness (Russell 1912, 46). In *Theory of Knowledge*, Russell identifies acquaintance with awareness: “we shall employ synonymously the two words “acquaintance” and “awareness,” generally the former. Thus when A experiences an object O, we shall say that A is acquainted with O” (Russell 1992, 35).

I prefer the simple identity. When Russell excludes indirect awareness, he has in mind cases like seeing yourself in a cloud. Compare seeing yourself in a mirror. Both seeing yourself in a cloud and seeing yourself in a mirror are indirect relative to seeing yourself by looking down, but in different ways. The indirectness of seeing yourself in a mirror is in the world. Light takes a bent path from you to your eyes. The indirectness of seeing yourself in a cloud is in your mind. It requires an imaginative leap. It is only this second kind of indirectness that is incompatible with acquaintance. Instead of introducing various senses of indirect awareness, I prefer saying that seeing yourself in a cloud is really just visual awareness of a likeness of yourself in a cloud, and not any kind of visual awareness of yourself. Then visual acquaintance can be identified with visual awareness. The same should go for other forms of acquaintance and awareness.

The main constraint on acquaintance that follows from identifying it with awareness or consciousness-of generalizes a familiar observation about camouflage. If you see a heap of debris hosting a camouflaged leaf-litter toad, then you see the heap of debris, but you do not see the leaf-litter toad. If the toad moves, so that it visually distinguishes itself from the heap of debris, then you do thereby see the toad. In general, if you are acquainted with an object, then that object phenomenally distinguishes itself from other objects. This is the basis for Russell’s repeated insistence that it is possible to be acquainted with a complex without being acquainted with its parts. The parts might fail to phenomenally distinguish themselves from the complex.

(ii) Acquaintance enables original reference. If a subject is acquainted with an object, then that subject is thereby enabled to refer to that object. I’m using “refer” broadly to include selective attention, *de re* thought, use of a demonstrative, and introduction of a proper name. In all these cases, the reference to an object is original in the sense that it does not depend on there being prior reference to that object. Anaphoric uses of pronouns and deferential uses of proper names are examples of non-original reference.

Which kinds of original reference acquaintance enables can vary between subjects. For example, acquaintance in a baby might enable selective attention without enabling use of a demonstrative. Later, after the baby grows up and learns a language, the same state of acquaintance might enable use of a demonstrative. Reference contrasts with description. “The nearest amphibian is a leaf-litter toad,” and, “That is a leaf-litter toad,” might both attribute the same property to the same object, but only the second refers to the toad. The first picks out the toad by specifying a condition it satisfies.

Finally, the claim that acquaintance enables original reference is weaker than the claim that acquaintance is necessary for original reference. Clearly, it is also weaker than the very strong claim that acquaintance is necessary for any reference. Russell famously endorsed claims analogous to this very strong claim, but they will not figure in the present discussion. Nor will the intermediate claim that acquaintance is necessary for original reference. Acquaintance is a route to original reference, maybe there are others.

(iii) Acquaintance is attributive just in case acquaintance with an object itself includes attributing properties to that object. The “itself includes” implies that whether a state of acquaintance is attributive depends on its nature, not on its accidental accompaniments, such as optional thoughts about the object it brings to consciousness.

Arguably, acquaintance is attributive because it is a form of consciousness. Consciousness of an object is consciousness of it as being some way. When the leaf-litter toad shows up in your experience, it does so by distinguishing itself from the forest debris, and for it to do this is for it to appear as having some properties, such as motion. Further, the attributiveness of acquaintance is compatible with its enabling original reference. Suppose your acquaintance with the leaf-litter toad attributes motion to it. This would justify qualifying the state of acquaintance by saying that it is acquaintance with the toad *as moving*. It does not follow, however, that the state of acquaintance secures reference to the toad in a way that rests on the toad satisfying a description that partly characterizes it as moving. It might be that reference to the toad is secured independently of the attribution, or it might be that the reference partly depends on the attribution and partly depends on your relations to the toad, such as your being affected by it.³

Did Russell really take acquaintance to be attributive? There are reasons to think that at the time of *Theory of Knowledge* he did take acquaintance to be attributive at least to some extent. In a summary of earlier parts of the manuscript, Russell writes:

Towards particulars with which we are acquainted, three subordinate dual relations were considered, namely sensation, memory, and imagination. These, we found, though their objects are usually somewhat different, are not essentially distinguished by their objects, but by the relations of subject and object. In sensation, subject and object are simultaneous; in memory, the subject is later than the object; while imagination does not essentially involve any time-relation of subject and object, though all time-relations are compatible with it. (Russell 1992, 100)

The time-relations Russell mentions are not just relations that in fact obtain in the different cases of sensation, memory, and imagination, but are ones that qualify states of sensation, memory, and imagination for their subjects: “memory may be distinguished from sensation and imagination by the fact that its object is given *as in the past*: there is a temporal relation of subject and object which is involved in the actual experience of memory” (Russell 1992, 56;

³ Different models for how this might go can be drawn from recent debates about the connection between perceptual reference and perceptual attribution. (Quilty-Dunn and Green 2021) makes a number of helpful distinctions and contains references to relevant literature.

italics added). These passages suggest Russell thought states of acquaintance attribute time-relations.^{4,5}

So, to review, acquaintance is a form of conscious that enables original reference and attributes properties to its objects. The next question to address is, which states of acquaintance are suitable bases for perceptually secured knowledge?

The closest analogue notion in *Theory of Knowledge* is self-evidence which Russell defines as “a property of judgments, consisting in the fact that, in the same experience with themselves, they are accompanied by acquaintance with their truth” (Russell 1992, 166). He motivates his account with a perceptual example:

Suppose we are in a theater before the beginning of the play: we shall believe that the curtain will rise, but this belief is not self-evident. At a certain moment, we see it rising, i.e. we perceive the corresponding complex; at this moment our belief *may* become self-evident, but I think it only *does* so if we perceive the correspondence of the curtain rising with our belief (Russell 1992, 165 – 166)

Russell describes a complex state of acquaintance that includes acquaintance with a judgment, a truth-maker for that judgment, and with the correspondence between judgment and truth-maker. Adapting this account of self-evidence via perception into an account of perceptually secured knowledge faces at least two instructive obstacles.

First, there is a problem about basing. It is doubtful that the judgement that the curtain is rising can both be an object of acquaintance in the complex state Russell describes and based on that very state of acquaintance. The judgment would have to precede itself.

The second obstacle is that it isn't clear how piling up objects of acquaintance will account for the point illustrated by the rising curtain example. To amplify the example, suppose you catch the rising curtain as obscure motion in the periphery of your visual field. This shows

⁴ Russell's chapter on analysis and synthesis is also relevant. Russell argues that there are two ways of being acquainted with a complex, such as the letter T:

There would seem, therefore, to be two kinds of perception of a complex, namely “simple perception”, which does not involve acquaintance with the parts, and “complex perception”, where the complex is seen *as* a complex of interrelated parts. (Russell 1992, 125; italics in the original)

The surrounding text makes clear that “seen as a complex” means acquainted with as complex, rather than judged to be complex on the basis of non-attributive acquaintance.

⁵ Resistance to my interpretation of Russell can be mounted on Russell's earlier discussion in *Problem of Philosophy*. There Russell denies that states of acquaintance are truth evaluable. But if they attribute properties to their objects, then we can evaluate a state of acquaintance according to whether its object has the properties attributed to it. This challenge is easily met. Russell took truth to apply to thoughts because of their characteristic many-place structure. Since they are two-place relations, states of acquaintance might be more or less accurate without thereby being truth evaluable in the way that thoughts are. However, Russell also famously maintained that acquaintance with an object constitutes knowledge of the object that is perfect and complete. Arguably, this means acquaintance with an object is not a gradable cognitive relation to it. But if states of acquaintance can be more or less accurate, then they are gradable cognitive relations to their objects. Exploring the interpretive and systematic options here would take the discussion too far off course.

that seeing the rising curtain doesn't put you in a position to know that the curtain is rising unless you can put what you see together with what you judge. As Russell says, "the relevance of the complex to the judgment must also be given in experience" (Russell 1992, 165). However, what makes acquaintance with this relevance relation (i.e., correspondence) the right tool for the job? The proposed acquaintance with relevance is mysterious, and whatever it might amount to, it remains unclear why the same point illustrated by the rising curtain example doesn't equally apply to the additional object of acquaintance. That is, without more details, we should wonder how adding relevance to our list of objects of acquaintance results in a total state of acquaintance sufficient for knowledge.

Both problems can be circumvented by exploiting the attributive nature of acquaintance, as follows:

[Russellian Relationism] If a perceptual state makes your belief that *p* based on it amount to knowledge, then that is because it is a state of acquaintance with a truth-maker for *p* as a truth-maker for *p*.

[Russellian Relationism] addresses the rising curtain example and has the form of a relationist account of the ground of perceptually secured knowledge. Let *p* be the proposition that the curtain is rising. In the rising curtain example, "the relevance of the complex"—the truth-maker for *p*—"to the judgment"—that *p*—is "also given in experience" because the experience is acquaintance with a truth-maker for *p* as a truth-maker for *p*.

So far so good, but [Russellian Relationism] is an inadequate account of the ground of perceptually secured knowledge. The state of acquaintance it identifies ensures the truth of the belief based on it, but it does not ensure the belief's safety or avoidance of epistemic defeat. So, the state of acquaintance meets the condition of being factive, but it does not meet the conditions of being safe and undefeated.

Philosophers aiming to put acquaintance to theoretical work in epistemology typically avoid the problems posed by cases of environmental luck and epistemic defeat, which motivate these additional conditions, by adjusting their ambitions. [Russellian Relationism] is problematic as an account of *knowledge*.

One natural way to adjust ambitions is to shift focus to justification. This is the line Richard Fumerton pursues. In one formulation, he writes:

S has noninferential justification for believing *P* if S is directly acquainted with the fact that *P*, the thought that *P* and a relation of correspondence holding between the thought that *P* and the fact that *P*. (Fumerton 2016, 240)

Fumerton gives a sufficient condition for non-inferential justification in general and opts to proliferate objects of acquaintance rather than exploit the attributive nature of acquaintance, but the important difference for now is the adjusted ambition to explain justification rather than knowledge. This should be understood as *prima facie* justification rather than all things considered justification, since otherwise Fumerton's account will not have identified a condition sufficient to rule out epistemic defeat.

Mark Johnston defends an interesting alternative to Fumerton. His “attentive sensory episodes” are two-place relational states of consciousness that enable original reference and attribute properties to their objects, and so can reasonably be identified with states of acquaintance as conceived of here (cf. Johnston 2011). In earlier work Johnston says that such states secure an achievement “better than mere knowledge” (Johnston 2006); in later work he says they secure a “neglected epistemic virtue” (Johnston 2011); in both publications, he avoids commitment to the view that states of acquaintance secure knowledge. I find Johnston’s view more congenial than Fumerton’s because it does not make acquaintance a requirement on justification, and as a result it leaves open the sort of phenomenal ground for justification mentioned in the discussion of good case/bad case reasoning.

However, I’m inclined to think that what is “better than mere knowledge” and perhaps also a “neglected epistemic virtue” is just a special *kind* of knowledge. It is knowledge based on firsthand experience of its subject matter. If this is so and the ground of such knowledge is relational, then there should be some way of modifying [Russellian Relationism] into an adequate account of perceptually secured knowledge. I pursue this theme in the next section.

3. A Relational Ground of Perceptually Secured Knowledge

The modification of [Russellian Relationism] that I will explore is minor. Here are the two views for comparison:

[Russellian Relationism] If a perceptual state makes your belief that *p* based on it amount to knowledge, then that is because it is a state of acquaintance with a truth-maker for *p* as a truth-maker for *p*.

[Modified Relationism] If a perceptual state makes your belief that *p* based on it amount to knowledge, then that is because it is a state of acquaintance with a truth-maker for its whole content as a truth-maker for *p*.

The difference introduced by [Modified Relationism] is that it requires a perceptual state securing knowledge that *p* to constitute acquaintance with a truth-maker for its whole content rather than just that part of its content that is accurate if *p*.^{6,7} If I have a perceptual experience as of a red pepper, then part of my perceptual state’s content locates a red pepper. But its whole content will include much else besides with implications for other aspects of the pepper and the environment in which it and I are situated. The difference between [Russellian Relationism] and [Modified Relationism] hinges on this surplus content. Specifically, does the veridicality of the surplus content, which veridicality is ensured by acquaintance with a truth-maker for that content, itself ensure that believing that *p* will be safe and undefeated?

⁶ There are views intermediate between [Russellian Relationism] and [Modified Relationism] that require acquaintance with a truth-maker for more than *p* but less than the whole content. To simply discussion, I do not consider intermediate views here.

⁷ [Modified Relationism] retains the qualifier “as a truth-maker for *p*” because that is the aspect of the perceptual state you are responsive to when you form a belief that *p* on the basis of it. The limited qualifier does not rule out that the perceptual state is qualified in many other ways as well.

One promising line of thought derives from John McDowell. He explicitly addresses the problems of environmental luck and epistemic defeat while defending the idea that a belief might be knowledge just because it is based on a suitable perceptual state (McDowell 2011). To a first approximation, if a perceptual state secures knowledge, then that is because it is a form of self-consciousness, namely consciousness of oneself as enabled to know. Here is one way McDowell puts it:

An experience in which the subject perceives that things are a certain way contains a potential for knowledge that the experience has that rational significance, even if the experience's potential for grounding a judgment that things are that way, which would be knowledgeable, is not actualized. (McDowell 2018, pg. 93)

"The potential for knowledge that the experience has that rational significance is internal to the experience" (McDowell 2018, pg. 93), where "that rational significance" is enabling one to know. McDowell's view suggests the following claim about the contents of knowledge securing perceptual states: if a perceptual state makes your belief that *p* based on it amount to knowledge, then part of its content is that you are enabled to know that *p*.

Suppose the contents of knowledge securing perceptual states are epistemically loaded in this way. Then [Modified Relationism] implies that if a perceptual state makes your belief that *p* based on it amount to knowledge, then that is because it acquaints you with a state of affairs making it true that you are enabled to know that *p*. Acquaintance with a state of affairs making it true that you are enabled to know that *p* obviously ensures that the conditions for knowing that *p* are met. Specifically, such a state of acquaintance ensures safety because being in it is inconsistent with the presence in the environment of knowledge disabling circumstances. And such a state of acquaintance also ensures the absence of defeat because being in it is incompatible with the presence to mind of defeating considerations.

If the prospects of [Modified Relationism] rest on the foregoing, then proponents require answers to the following questions. First, do some perceptual states have epistemically loaded content? We have epistemic thoughts about some of our perceptual states. But the question is whether some perceptual states represent their own "rational significance." Suppose some do. Second, do some among those perceptual states acquaint us with truth-makers for their epistemically loaded contents? Perceptually representing oneself as enabled to know is one thing. Being perceptually acquainted with a truth-maker for the proposition that one is enabled to know is another thing. The second question is about the possible objects of perceptual acquaintance.

Some support for thinking the first question can be answered positively derives from evidence favoring perceptual reality monitoring theories of perceptual consciousness.⁸

⁸ Another line of thought is to conceive of epistemically loaded content as deriving from perception of epistemic affordances. The idea that perceptual consciousness includes self-consciousness echoes Gibson's claim that "self-perception and environment perception go together" (Gibson 2014/1979, pg. 109). Perception of affordances—i.e., "what [the environment] offers the animal" (Gibson 2014/1979, pg. 119)—exploits this duality. The range of perceivable affordances is open-ended and depends on the perceiver. Gibson mentions affordances for taking shelter, eating, and making traces (e.g., by a pen). According to the affordance-theoretic line of thought, the

According to such theories, conscious perception is due to a higher-order representation bearing epistemically loaded content with respect a first-order perceptual state, for example content to the effect that the perceptual state “is a reliable reflection of the external world right now” (Lau 2019, pg. 2; see Lau 2022 for a book-length treatment). The evidence for perceptual reality monitoring theories of perceptual consciousness counts as evidence for thinking some states of perceptual consciousness represent themselves as enabling knowledge only if some further conditions are met.

First, the epistemically loaded content should attribute the property of enabling *knowledge* not just being a “reliable reflection of the external world right now.” Accumulating evidence in favor of the view that the capacity to attribute knowledge is among the most basic capacities for attributing mental characteristics suggests this condition is met (cf. Phillips et al 2021). Lau’s rendering of the epistemically loaded content is an approximation, not something built into the view. So, it is corrigible by broader considerations about which capacities to attribute mental characteristics are likely to be deployed in basic processes such as those involved in generating perceptual consciousness.

Second, the epistemically loaded content should be reflected in perceptual consciousness. There is reason to think this condition is met too. Part of the perceptual reality monitoring theory of perceptual consciousness is the claim that higher-order representations operative in generating perceptual consciousness are responsible for distinguishing perception from imagery. Typically, there is a felt difference between consciously perceiving a red pepper and consciously imagining a red pepper. Part of the theory is that this felt difference derives from the distinctive epistemically loaded content of the higher-order representations that are responsible for making perception conscious (Dijkstra et al 2022; Lau 2019, 2022).

Proponents of [Modified Relationism] needn’t fully commit to a perceptual reality monitoring theory of perceptual consciousness. That such theories are empirically credible and supported by evidence is enough to show that perceptual states with epistemically loaded contents shouldn’t be ruled out. This modest point can be supplemented by a second, independent reason for thinking that they do in fact occur. It derives from first person reflection.

According to Husserl, states of consciousness are felt as having a “mode of validity.” He writes:

Consciousness, which gives its object in the flesh (originally), does not only have the mode of presentation in the flesh, which distinguishes it from presentifying consciousness and empty consciousness (both of which do not present in the same sense in the flesh); it also has a variable mode of being or a variable mode of validity. Original, normal perception has the primordial mode, “being valid simpliciter”; this is what we call straightforward naïve certainty. The appearing object is there in uncontested and unbroken certainty. What is uncontested points to possible contestations, or even to breaks, precisely to those we have just described, and by

affordance of securing knowledge is no less plausible an instance of a perceivable affordance than these others. I’m inclined to think there is a version of the affordance-theoretic approach that is compatible with the approach pursued in this paper.

becoming bifurcated, they undergo a modification in their mode of validity. In doubt, both presentations in the flesh contending with one another have the same mode of validity, “questionable,” and each presentation that is questionable is precisely in dispute and contested by the other (Husserl 2001, pgs. 74 – 75).

Consciousness which gives its object in the flesh is perceptual experience. Its “in the flesh” aspect distinguishes it from imagination (“presentifying” consciousness) and thought (“empty” consciousness). But two instances of in the flesh perceptual consciousness might differ from each other in their “validity.” In this passage Husserl contrasts perceptual consciousness that is felt with naïve certainty and perceptual consciousness that is felt with doubt. The doubt he has in mind arises by a conflict in perception over time. Difference in felt validity is what Husserl means by modalization, which in addition to naïve certainty and doubtfulness includes possibility, probability, and certainty again but this time in a non-naïve form due to its resulting from a resolution of conflicts.

In support of this view Husserl presents examples and develops considerations that look like what are now called phenomenal contrast arguments (cf. Siegel 2007). Here is the kind of example he discusses. Consider the following two cases:

Case 1. You seem to see a movie star, approach to get a selfie, find out it is a wax statue, and as you walk away seem to see a famous television actor.

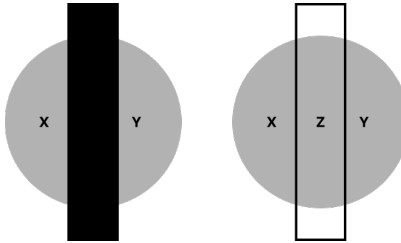
Case 2. You do see a movie star, succeed in getting a selfie, and as you walk away see a famous television actor.

Husserl’s idea is that the visual experience as of a television actor in Case 1 has a mode of validity: it is felt as put in doubt by the previous visual experience as of a movie star. A reasonable inference, this time about the visual experience as of a television actor in Case 2, is that it also has a mode of validity: it is felt with naïve certainty. We might not have attended to this aspect of the experience without first contrasting it with the experience in Case 1, but once we do make the contrast, then, according to Husserl, we should recognize naïve certainty as a characteristic the experience has all along. The modes of validity Husserl discusses under the heading of certainty—whether naïve or not—are naturally taken to be forms of consciousness of oneself as enabled to know.

Suppose some perceptual states have epistemically loaded content or represent their own “rational significance.” Proponents of [Modified Relationism] need to make a further case that some among those perceptual states acquaint us with truth-makers for their epistemically loaded contents. There are prima facie difficulties with this idea. The epistemically loaded content attributes being enabled to know, but the absence of knowledge disabling circumstances such as those associated with epistemic luck depend on conditions outside one’s perceptual field. Because these conditions are outside one’s perceptual field, they are not themselves phenomenally differentiated from a background, so how can they be objects of acquaintance? They cannot, but they also do not need to be. Perceptual acquaintance with a truth-maker for epistemically loaded might be an instance of being acquainted with a whole by

being acquainted with a sufficient part of that whole. To see how this might work, let's first consider the simpler case of perceptual acquaintance with a partly occluded surface.

Imagine a real-world scenario corresponding to the left configuration in the following illustration:



When you see X and Y, but Z is occluded, you still count as seeing the whole disc made up of X, Y, and Z. You are not perceptually acquainted with two disconnected pieces. You are perceptually acquainted with two pieces connected by a part with which you are not perceptually acquainted. Why might that be? One natural explanation puts weight on the attributive nature of acquaintance.

Suppose the properties attributed by a state of acquaintance partly determine the object of that state of acquaintance. Then perceptual acquaintance with the whole disc made up of X, Y, and Z might be secured by a process analogous to using a demonstrative adjective. Here is a first approximation. When you see X and Y, you perceptually attribute the property of being parts of a whole to them. You also deploy a perceptual analogue to a demonstrative adjective such as “that whole to which X and Y belong.” You are perceptually acquainted with a whole that includes X, Y, and Z because it is the whole satisfying the perceptual analogue to the demonstrative adjective. One might worry that demonstrative adjectives are a kind of complex demonstrative, but being perceptually acquainted with something should enable simple demonstrative reference to it. Here I'd say that the simplicity need only be at the post-perceptual level. If I see something, then I can simply point to it in thought or language. But it might be that my capacity to see it in the first place depends on structures analogous to complex demonstration.

A similar story can be told for how perceptual acquaintance with a truth-maker for epistemically loaded content can be secured. Suppose, for example, that when I see a red pepper, I perceptually attribute the property of belonging to a scenario enabling me to know that it is red to it. I also deploy a perceptual analogue to a demonstrative adjective such as, “that scenario to which this pepper belongs.” I am perceptually acquainted with a scenario that includes the pepper and whatever else is required for me to know that it is red because it is the scenario satisfying the perceptual analogue to the demonstrative adjective.

With this story on the table, however, one might begin to have doubts about the viability of epistemically loaded content. Perceptual acquaintance with a partly occluded surface depends on perceptual interpolation. Z is inserted between X and Y. If there is perceptual acquaintance with a truth-maker for epistemically loaded content, however, then it depends on more than perceptual interpolation since the truth-maker will include conditions outside one's perceptual field. This can seem like too much. However, there is a line of research

in perceptual psychology suggesting how it could work. I have in mind studies of what's called boundary extension.

Studies of boundary extension belong to the larger field of research on scene perception. A characteristic finding in the larger field of research is that it takes us less than 100 ms to reliably classify scenes by their global properties such as whether they afford concealment or navigability and into their basic kinds such as whether they are deserts or forests (Greene and Oliva 2009). The time course of such classification is one bit of evidence in favor of the view that the classification is perceptual, and not a result of post-perceptual judgment. Hubbard et al begin their review of the literature on boundary extension with the following description of the basic datum:

When observers view a close-up picture of a scene, and their memory for that scene is later tested, those observers usually remember the scene as containing more information than was actually viewed. Information (objects, background, etc.) that might have been present just beyond the boundaries of the view but that was not actually visible is often incorporated into memory for the scene. It is as if the boundaries of the remembered scene were extended outward, and so this has been referred to as boundary extension. (Hubbard et al 2010)

The description might suggest boundary extension is due to memory rather than perception. The likely memory processes, however, are perceptual memory processes, such as those involved in intersaccadic perception. On balance, theories of boundary extension attribute it to some aspect of perception (in addition to Hubbard et al 2010, see Intraub 2011).

There is no need to align with a specific theory for present purposes. The key takeaway from research on scene perception in general and boundary extension in particular that I want to emphasize is neutral between specific theories. It is that we perceptually attribute properties to scenes that impose conditions on what is happening outside our perceptual field. If this is true, then there is no barrier to attributing the property of enabling knowledge to a scene. If such a property can be attributed, then acquaintance with a truth-maker for its instantiation can be secured. It might be secured by a process analogous to using a demonstrative adjective. Or it might be secured by an alternative model for how the contents of perceptual attribution partly determines the objects of perceptual acquaintance. Proponents of [Modified Relationism] have reason to explore the issue further, but my own discussion will have to end here.

I've been considering the prospects of two ideas. The first is the view that there is perceptually secured knowledge, where that consists of beliefs amounting to knowledge just because they are based on suitable perceptual states. The second is relationism about the ground of perceptually secured knowledge. This is the view that if a perceptual state makes your belief based on it amount to knowledge, then that is because it is an appropriate kind of relational state. A version of this view can be traced back to Russell's acquaintance theoretic account of self-evidence but requires developments encapsulated in the following formulation:

[Modified Relationism] If a perceptual state makes your belief that p based on it amount to knowledge, then that is because it is a state of acquaintance with a truth-maker for its whole content as a truth-maker for p.

[Modified Relationism] aims to identify a perceptual state that meets the conditions of being factive—i.e., incompatible with your belief that p being false—safe—i.e., incompatible with your belief that p being true by luck—and undefeated—i.e., incompatible with your belief that p being unjustified because epistemically defeated. The existence of such perceptual states is not obvious. Defending [Modified Relationism] requires endorsing a form of disjunctivism, emphasizing the attributive nature of acquaintance, and admitting epistemically loaded perceptual content. I've tried to show how these commitments can be developed in ways that respect both phenomenological reflection and empirical evidence. I don't see any reason to rule out [Modified Relationism] as an account of the ground of perceptually secured knowledge, but work remains to put the view on more solid footing.

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