

Acquaintance and the Qualitative Character of Conscious Intentional States

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Abstract

Conscious intentional states are mental states that represent things as being a certain way and do so consciously: they involve a phenomenally conscious representation. For any phenomenally conscious state, there is something it is like for its subject to be in it. The way it is like for a subject to be in a certain phenomenal state is the state's phenomenal character. According to some authors, phenomenal character has two components: qualitative character (i.e., the "what it is like" component) and subjective character (the "for the subject" component). Elsewhere, I have argued for an acquaintance theory of subjective character: a conscious representation is "for the subject" iff the subject is acquainted with it (Giustina forthcoming). The aim of this paper is to take some initial steps toward developing an acquaintance account of qualitative character. More specifically, I develop an acquaintance-representational account of the qualitative character of conscious intentional states, on which qualitative character is constituted by a subject's being acquainted with the conscious intentional state's representational properties. By reviewing the main extant accounts of qualitative character and highlighting their shortcomings, I argue that the acquaintance-representational account is antecedently more plausible than its competitors.

Keywords: Phenomenal consciousness, Intentionality, Acquaintance, Representationalism.

1. Introduction

There is a peculiar way *chocolate melting in your mouth* tastes to you; there is a different, (equally peculiar) way *the gray sky over your head* looks to you; and there is yet a different way *brushing against a burning-hot iron*, or *being irritated by a careless behavior* feel to you. For each of these experiences—chocolate taste, gray-sky seeing, burning sensation, irritation feeling—there is *something it is like for you* to undergo it. The way it is like for you to have a certain experience is the experience's *phenomenal character*.

As pointed out by Joe Levine (2001) and effectively articulated by Uriah Kriegel (2009), phenomenal character has two distinguishable components. On the one hand, there is the peculiar *way it is like* to undergo a certain experience

(the *chocolate-like* way, the *gray-like* way, the *burning-like* way, the *irritation-like* way). On the other hand, there is the eminently subjective perspective on that peculiar way of being like, the subject's ineliminable *point of view* that is constitutive of each of his or her experiences—that is, the “for me” component of *the way it is like for me* to have a certain experience. I follow Kriegel in calling the former *qualitative character* and the latter *subjective character*.¹ Qualitative character is what makes the phenomenal *difference* between your chocolate-taste experience, your gray-sky experience, your burning-sensation experience, and your irritation-feeling experience. Subjective character is what is *shared* by *all* experiences: it is the invariable phenomenal manifestation of the subject's perspective.

Arguably, a theory of phenomenal consciousness should account for both qualitative and subjective character: it should explain in virtue of what there is *something it is like* to have a certain experience, which is different from the way it is like to have some *other* experience; and it should explain in virtue of what, for *any* experience I (the subject) undergo, there is something it is like *for me* to have it—each experience of mine includes my own subjective perspective on its contents, and such a perspective is phenomenally manifest.

Most philosophical theories of phenomenal consciousness are *representational*: they reduce phenomenal character to representation. On *first-order representationalism*, (suitably) representing something is sufficient for there being *something it is like* to have a mental state (Dretske 1995; Tye 1995). Yet, it has been objected that first-order representationalism can at most offer an *incomplete* account of phenomenal character because, even if it could be suitable as an account of *qualitative character*, it cannot explain *subjective character*.² The underlying idea is that, to account for subjective character, first-order representation is insufficient: for a mental state to have subjective character, its subject must be *aware of it*—we may call this the *Inner Awareness Principle*. *Meta-representational* views account for such “inner awareness” (and thus for subjective character) in terms of meta-representation: a mental state *M* of a subject *S* has subjective character only if *S* is aware of *M*, and *S* is aware of *M* iff *S* is in a mental state *M** that suitably represents *M*. There are two kinds of meta-representational view: *higher-order representationalism*, on which *M* and *M** are distinct mental states (Armstrong 1968; Lycan 1996; Rosenthal 1997) and *self-representationalism*, on which *M* and *M** are the same state (see especially Kriegel 2009; see also Carruthers 2000, 2005; Van Gulick 2000, 2004; Gennaro 1996, 2012).

This paper is part of a project whose aim is to explore and develop an alternative, *non-representational* theory of consciousness, on which what ultimately explains phenomenal consciousness is not representation but the mental relation of *acquaintance*. Some theorists argue that the nature and phenomenal character of at least some experiences (*perceptual* experiences) fundamentally depend on the subject's bearing a direct experiential relation (acquaintance) to objects in their environment and some of their properties. This view is usually called *naïve realism* or *relationalism*, and it is *not* the view I want to propose.³ Similarly to meta-

¹ The notion of ‘subjective character’ is, arguably, almost equivalent to Levine's notion of ‘subjectivity’.

² See, e.g., Levine (2006) and Kriegel (2009).

³ More on relationalism in §5.

representationalism, and unlike both first-order representationalism and relationalism, the kind of acquaintance theory I want to develop is based on the idea that a mental state is phenomenally conscious only if its subject is aware of it in the right way (i.e., it assumes the Inner Awareness Principle). However, unlike meta-representationalism, it explains such “inner awareness” not in terms of meta-representation, but in terms of *acquaintance*: *S* is aware of *M* in the right way iff *S* is acquainted with *M*. We may call this the *Inner Acquaintance Theory* of consciousness.⁴

A few philosophers have recently proposed some versions of the Inner Acquaintance Theory (Hellie 2007; Coleman 2015; Williford 2015; Levine 2019; Giustina forthcoming); however, the theory is still far underexplored. One of the aspects of the theory that particularly needs further scrutiny is its account of *qualitative character*. Motivated mainly by dissatisfaction with meta-representational accounts of subjectivity, extant acquaintance-based accounts have focused almost entirely on *subjective character*, the idea being that since meta-representation is insufficient to explain the peculiar “subjective significance” of phenomenal consciousness, some different, sui generis kind of relation (one that uniquely ties subjects to their experiences)—such as acquaintance—is needed (cf. Levine 2006). By contrast, an account of the qualitative character in the acquaintance-theory framework is still missing.

This paper takes some steps toward filling this gap: it aims to develop a novel account of *qualitative character* that is both explanatorily plausible and fitting for the Inner Acquaintance Theory of consciousness. More precisely, it aims to develop an account of the qualitative character of *conscious intentional states*. Conscious intentional states are mental states that *represent* (some object in) the world as being a certain way and do so *consciously* (that is, *phenomenally*): they involve a phenomenally conscious representation. Paradigmatic examples of conscious intentional states are perceptual experiences. I restrict my account to conscious intentional states in order to remain neutral on what the qualitative character consists of in *non-intentional* conscious states—if there are any. It is often pointed out that bodily sensations such as pains, pleasures, and itches (Block 1995a, 1995b), and especially some affective experiences such as moods (Deonna and Teroni 2012) do *not* seem to be intentional: apparently, they do not represent anything at all. *Intentionalists*, however, have argued that *all* conscious states—including bodily sensations and moods—do in fact have representational properties, albeit sometimes peculiar ones (see e.g. Tye 1997 on pain sensations and Mendelovici 2014 on moods). If it turns out that all conscious experiences are intentional, then my thesis will quantify over all conscious experiences. Here I remain neutral on the scope of the class of conscious intentional states. I will nonetheless assume that (at least) *some* conscious states belong to that class, and argue for a thesis that purports to apply to all such conscious intentional states.

In §2 I introduce the notion of acquaintance. In §3 I offer a preliminary sketch of the view I propose. In §4 I present a brief overview of extant representational accounts of qualitative character and highlight the main shortcomings of each. In §5 I consider extant acquaintance approaches to qualitative character (notably

⁴ I take some initial steps toward developing this project in Giustina (2022b) and (forthcoming).

relationalism) and highlight their shortcomings. In §6 I develop my own account and suggest that it is superior to its competitors.

2. The Acquaintance Relation

Acquaintance is an epistemically significant mental relation, which is typically characterized in terms of *direct awareness*, the relevant directness being both epistemic and metaphysical (Gertler 2011). Acquaintance is *epistemically* direct in that, when a subject S is acquainted with x , S gets an epistemic access to x that is (i) non-inferential (no inference mediates between x and S's epistemic access to x) and (ii) independent of S's having epistemic access to anything else (in particular, it is independent of S's entertaining any judgment). Acquaintance is *metaphysically* direct in that, when S is acquainted with x , no causal process mediates between x and S's awareness of x . Such a metaphysical directness is sometimes spelled out in terms of constitution—or at least taken to be intimately connected to a relation that is constitutive (rather than causal): when S is acquainted with x , S's awareness of x is (partly) constituted by x (see, e.g., Gertler 2001; Chalmers 2003; Balog 2012; Coleman 2015).⁵ Metaphysical directness is part of what makes acquaintance fundamentally different from representation: while representation is causally mediated (in the good case at least, the representation is causally dependent on what is represented), acquaintance is not. Another fundamental difference between acquaintance and representation is that while the latter can be directed at non-existent objects, acquaintance entails the existence of its relata: if S is acquainted with x , then x (as well as, of course, S) exists.

Made popular by Bertrand Russell (1910, 1912), but then neglected for much of the twentieth century, the notion of acquaintance has seen a recent resurgence, both in epistemology and in philosophy of mind.⁶ In epistemology, it has been appealed to both in the context of contemporary defenses of foundationalism (Fales 1996; BonJour 2000, 2003; Fumerton 1996, 2001, 2009; Hasan 2013) and in the more recent revival of Russellian *knowledge by acquaintance* (McGinn 2008; Tye 2008a; Hofmann 2014; Fiocco 2017; Coleman 2019; Duncan 2020, 2021b; Giustina 2022a). In philosophy of mind, the notion of acquaintance has been deployed in the “phenomenal concept strategy” defense of physicalism (Papineau 2002, 2006; Balog 2012), in some versions of naïve realism about perception (Campbell 2002; Brewer 2011; Soteriou 2013), as well as in the explanation of introspection (Gertler 2001, 2011, 2012; Chalmers 2003; Horgan and Kriegel 2007; Giustina 2021). Some philosophers have proposed acquaintance-based accounts of consciousness and subjectivity (Hellie 2007; Coleman 2015; Williford 2015; Duncan 2018; Levine 2019; Giustina forthcoming), but the use of acquaintance in this area is still underexplored. This paper's ambition is to offer a contribution to the latter strand of the debate, by taking some steps toward developing an acquaintance-based account of the phenomenal character of conscious experience.

⁵ Different acquaintance theories spell out such a constitutive relation in different ways. Gertler (2001), for example, characterizes it in terms of “embedding”; Balog (2012) and Coleman (2015) spell it out in terms of “mental quotation”. Whether constitution is full or partial is often left unspecified.

⁶ See Raleigh (2019) and Duncan (2021a) for a comprehensive introduction to the notion of acquaintance. For a recent collection on acquaintance, see Knowles and Raleigh (2019).

3. The Acquaintance-Representational Account of Qualitative Character: A First Pass

The properties in virtue of which an experience represents something as being a certain way are the experience's *representational properties*. What is represented (e.g. gray sky, chocolate) is the experience's *representational content*. The same content may be represented in different *manners*: you may represent the gray sky, say, *perceptually* (when you *see* it) or *cognitively* (when you *think* about it); and you may represent chocolate, say, *gustatorily* (when you *taste* it) or *olfactorily* (when you *smell* it). The specific manner in which a content is represented is often called *representational attitude*.

Intuitively, a conscious intentional state's representational properties should somehow contribute to what it is like to be in it. There appears to be some important (even necessary) connection between your representing the sky as being gray and the peculiar gray-ish way the sky looks to you: what it is like to see the gray sky (as opposed to seeing a *blue* sky, or *thinking* of the gray sky, or *tasting chocolate*) seems to be partly determined by the way the sky is represented in your experience. If so, representational properties play a role in making distinct conscious intentional states phenomenally different from one another, by contributing to determine their *qualitative character*. Accordingly, conscious intentional states with different representational properties will have different qualitative characters; and, plausibly, conscious intentional states with different qualitative characters will have different representational properties.

Arguably, what grounds this intuition is that qualitative character is the aspect of phenomenal experience in virtue of which we are *aware of the world*—that in virtue of which we are *experientially connected* to our environment. Accordingly, such a connection with the world must play a role in determining qualitative character. When it comes to conscious intentional states, it seems that the most plausible way of spelling out awareness of the world is in terms of *representation*: we are aware of the world (partly) by representing it as being a certain way.⁷ If so, representation should contribute to constituting phenomenal character.

The intuition of a necessary connection between representational properties and qualitative character may be resisted (see e.g. Block 1990 and Papineau 2021), but I do not have the space to address this here. The view I propose is mainly intended for those who already share that intuition. Note, however, that the existence of a necessary connection between representational properties and conscious intentional states' qualitative character is antecedently quite plausible: conscious intentional states have representational properties, and such representational properties are (arguably) phenomenally apparent. This finds phenomenological support in the so-called *transparency of experience* (Harman 1990): when we try to introspectively attend to the phenomenology of a conscious intentional state (such as seeing the gray sky) we cannot help attending to what the intentional state represents (the gray sky).

The theory I am going to explore, then, embraces the abovementioned intuition and accounts for the qualitative character of conscious intentional states partly by appeal to their representational properties. However, arguably, since

⁷ Though, of course, this is not the only way such an experiential connection with the world has been explained. As we will see in §5, relationalists explain it in terms of perceptual acquaintance.

representational properties can be instantiated *unconsciously* (as in the case of subliminal perception of gray sky), while qualitative character (as an aspect of *phenomenal* character) can only be instantiated consciously, they cannot constitute the *whole* story about qualitative character. Some further ingredient is needed—or so I argue.

Roughly, my proposal is that a conscious intentional state has qualitative character just in virtue of (i) having the representational properties it does and (ii) its subject's being acquainted with these representational properties. More precisely:

ARA: For any subject *S* and conscious intentional state φ of *S*, such that φ has representational properties $R1, R2, \dots, Rn$ and qualitative character *Q*, φ has *Q* in virtue of (i) having $R1, R2, \dots, Rn$ and (ii) *S*'s being acquainted with $R1, R2, \dots, Rn$.

We may call this the *acquaintance-representational account* of conscious intentional states' qualitative character (*ARA* for short). It is a *hybrid* account: partly representational—in that representational properties play a constitutive role in determining qualitative character—and partly non-representational—in that representational properties are not sufficient for qualitative character and must be supplemented by the non-representational relation of acquaintance.

ARA is a thesis about the qualitative character of *conscious intentional states*. Whether it constitutes an account of qualitative character *tout-court* depends on whether *all* phenomenally conscious states are intentional—a question that, as noted, I am not going to address here.

In the remainder, I try to show that *ARA* is superior to its main competitors: representationalism and relationalism. I set aside approaches (such as *qualia* theories and *sense-datum* theories) on which connection with the world plays *no* role in determining qualitative character for two related reasons. First, they are minoritarian. Secondly, as noted, when it comes to conscious intentional states, the idea that *no connection with the world* of any kind plays *any* role in determining their qualitative character is highly counterintuitive (this is, perhaps, part of the reason why those approaches are minoritarian).

4. Representational Approaches to Qualitative Character

4.1 First-Order Representationalism

On *first-order representationalism* (*FOR*), the qualitative character of an experience fully reduces to its first-order representational properties, i.e., the representational properties in virtue of which a mental state represents some worldly (non-mental) object as being a certain way (the 'first-order' qualification is meant to distinguish these representational properties from 'meta-'representational properties—to be discussed in §4.2.):

FOR: For any conscious intentional state φ with first-order representational properties $R1, R2, \dots, Rn$ and qualitative character *Q*, φ has *Q* just in virtue of having $R1, R2, \dots, Rn$.

FOR does straightforwardly justice to the intuition of an intimate connection between conscious intentional states' qualitative character and (first-order) representational

properties.⁸ It has a nice and clean explanation of why different (kinds of) conscious states differ in qualitative character: two conscious intentional states φ and ψ differ in qualitative character iff they have different representational properties. By the same token, FOR has a nice and clean explanation of that in virtue of which a conscious intentional state has the qualitative character it does—that is, an explanation of qualitative character's *identity conditions* (cf. Kriegel 2009: 10): a conscious intentional state has the qualitative character it does just in virtue of having the first-order representational properties it does.

However, FOR fails to explain in virtue of what a conscious intentional state has qualitative character at all—that is, in virtue of what it has qualitative character as opposed to no qualitative character. In other words, it does not provide qualitative character's existence conditions (cf. Kriegel 2009: 10). Qualitative character is an aspect of phenomenal character. Phenomenal character is the property of an experience in virtue of which there is something it is like for its subject to have it: necessarily, it is a conscious property. Representation, by contrast, may occur unconsciously: representational properties are not necessarily conscious. A subliminal visual perception of, say, the image of a yellow banana (visually) represents the banana as being yellow, but it is an unconscious mental state: there is nothing it is like for its subject to have it—it occurs, so to speak, in the dark, outside of phenomenal consciousness. First-order representation may well explain in virtue of what seeing a yellow banana has a yellowish (bananish) qualitative character (rather than, say, a reddish one), but it does not explain why seeing a yellow banana has qualitative character in the first place (while subliminally perceiving a yellow banana does not). Therefore, mere first-order representation is insufficient for explaining qualitative character (Sturgeon 2000; Kriegel 2002; Chalmers 2004; Prinz 2015).

Some first-order representationalists have refined the view by providing further conditions representations need to satisfy in order to be conscious—and thus *suitable* for constituting qualitative character. Michael Tye (1995), for instance, has argued that, to constitute qualitative character, representational content has to be *poised*, *abstract*, and *non-conceptual*. However, as effectively argued by Kriegel (2002, 2009), such features are not yet jointly sufficient for representational content to be *conscious* content.⁹ For (i) some unconscious states (e.g. standing beliefs) may have abstract representational content as well; (ii) unconscious representational states can be non-conceptual (e.g. some states of the visual system at early stages of the visual process); (iii) *being poised* is a *functional role* property, rather than a *representational* property (Kriegel 2002): as such, it is *dispositional* rather than *occurrent*; but dispositional properties cannot be *conscious* and so, arguably, they cannot be what most fundamentally explains consciousness, for consciousness is an *occurrent*, *manifest* property (Kriegel 2009: 71-77).¹⁰ More plausibly, it is a representational content's being conscious that explains its being poised.

⁸ On some versions of first-order representationalism, qualitative character *supervenes* on first-order representational properties; on others, qualitative character *reduces to* first-order representational properties; on yet others, qualitative character is *identical* to first-order representational properties.

⁹ Arguably, abstractness and non-conceptuality are not even necessary (Kriegel 2002).

¹⁰ Besides, if what most fundamentally makes an intentional content conscious is its being *poised*, then qualitative character does *not* depend only on representational properties (as per FOR), but (at least) also on functional-role properties (Kriegel 2002).

So, although FOR seems to nicely capture qualitative character's identity conditions (what makes the difference between conscious intentional states with different qualitative characters), it fails to account for its existence conditions (what makes the difference between intentional states with qualitative character and intentional states that are unconscious and thereby have no qualitative character).¹¹

4.2 Meta-Representationalism

Like FOR, *meta-representationalism* (MR), offers a reductive explanation of qualitative character in terms of representational properties. Unlike FOR, though, MR appeals not only to first-order representation, but also to meta-representation.

A *prima facie* promising strategy for MR is to account for the *identity* conditions of conscious intentional states' qualitative character in terms of *first-order representation* (thereby preserving FOR's merits in this respect) and for its *existence* conditions in terms of *meta-representation* (and thus attempt to overcome FOR's shortcomings). More precisely:

MR: For any subject *S* and conscious intentional state φ of *S*, such that φ has first-order representational properties $R1, R2, \dots, Rn$ and qualitative character *Q*, (i) φ has *Q* rather than some other qualitative character just in virtue of having $R1, R2, \dots, Rn$ and (ii) φ has *Q* rather than no qualitative character just in virtue of *S*'s harboring a mental state M^* that (suitably) represents φ .

On *higher-order representationalism* (HOR), φ and M^* are distinct mental states— M^* is a higher-order representation; on *self-representationalism* (SR), φ and M^* are the same state— φ represents itself. What counts as *suitable* meta-representation varies depending on the specific meta-representational theory; this is not going to be relevant for the ensuing discussion.

So, metarepresentational views promise to do justice to the intuition of a connection between qualitative character and first-order representational properties while offering an account of qualitative character's existence conditions. However, digging into the details of HOR and SR reveals that, in fact, neither can keep this promise.

As for HOR, a general problem concerns the possibility of *targetless* or *misrepresenting* higher-order states. Any mental state that represents something distinct from itself may well *misrepresent* it. *Perceptual* representations, for instance, may be *illusory*, i.e. represent some worldly object (say, a rat) as having some property that it does not really have (say, being pink, while in fact it is brown); or they may be *hallucinatory*, i.e. represent some worldly object in the absence of any such object (as when you have a visual experience as of a pink rat while no rat is before you). However, when it comes to awareness of our own *phenomenal states*, no such illusory or hallucinatory cases seem to be possible: if it appears to you that you are in phenomenal state φ with phenomenal property *Q*, it cannot be the case that φ is *not Q*, or that you are in no phenomenal state at all.¹² When you inadvertently touch the iron on your board, and have a tactile sensation as of burning heat, even

¹¹ A similar point is made by Kriegel (2002, 2009: 71-77), with the only difference that he applies it to phenomenal character in general, rather than to qualitative character specifically.

¹² This does not imply that you are *infallible* about your conscious states: your occurrent *beliefs* about your own conscious states may be inaccurate or false.

though the sensation may be illusory—if, say, the iron is off—your *awareness of the sensation* cannot: necessarily, if you experience a sensation of heat, the *experienced sensation* is present, and the way it *feels* (burning-heat-like) is the way it *appears to you to feel*. This is sometimes spelled out in terms of *intimacy* (Weisberg 2008; Kriegel 2009: 107-8): there is a specially intimate relationship between a subject and their experiences, one in virtue of which there cannot be any *appearance/reality* gap in awareness of conscious experience: it (phenomenally) *is* exactly how it (phenomenally) *appears* to be.¹³ The ‘phenomenally’ qualification is added to specify that (i) the *reality* of the conscious state at issue is phenomenal rather than *metaphysical* (it is not a claim about the fundamental *metaphysical nature* of conscious states, that may outstrip their *phenomenal* nature and include, e.g., their neural correlates) and (ii) the *appearance* at issue is phenomenal rather than *epistemic* (the claim does not concern our *judgments* about our experiences, which may well be sometimes incorrect).¹⁴

By construing the subject’s awareness of their conscious state as a distinct mental state that represents it, HOR implies that there *can* be such an appearance/reality gap in conscious experience: the higher-order state M^* may mistarget the first-order state φ or misrepresent it as having a phenomenal property that it does not have. However, if the *intimacy* claim is correct, this is a bad result and a reason to be suspicious about HOR’s plausibility.

Relatedly, and more strictly connected to our purpose, HOR severs the connection between qualitative character and first-order representational properties, thereby failing to do justice to the intuition that motivates a representational treatment of qualitative character in the first place. If higher-order representation can vary independently, and indeed be present in the absence of any first-order representation, then the latter turns out explanatorily inert: the phenomenal character is *fully determined* by the higher-order representation (cf. Kidd 2011; Coleman 2015; McClelland 2020). I will come back to this shortly, as SR is affected by a similar worry.

In line with the meta-representational strategy, on SR a fundamental explanatory role is played by the subject’s awareness of a first-order state, and such awareness is constituted by a meta-representation. However, unlike HOR, this meta-representation is not a distinct higher-order representation, but the first-order state’s *self-representation*. This prevents the meta-representation from being possibly *targetless*: obviously, a mental state cannot represent itself *in absence of itself*.

As for *misrepresentation*, it is not immediately clear that SR fares better than HOR: at least *prima facie*, a mental state may well misrepresent itself. Kriegel (2009: 109) addresses this worry by appeal to the notion of *constituting self-representation*. Roughly, the idea is that qualitative character is *constituted* by a mental state’s self-representation:

¹³ Arguments for *intimacy* abound in the literature. See, e.g., Byrne (1997), Neander (1998), Levine (2001, 2018), Gennaro (2006), Hellie (2007), Kriegel (2009), Kidd (2011), Coleman (2015), and Liu (forthcoming). To be sure, not all theorists believe in the absence of appearance/reality gap in conscious experience (see, e.g., Rosenthal 2005, Brown 2010, Churchland 2013, Hill 2016, and Schwitzgebel 2011). I do not have the space to get into this debate here. Note, however, that regardless of the cogency of the no-appearance/reality gap intuition, HOR’s account of qualitative character is affected by a further problem, which it shares with SR (see below).

¹⁴ On phenomenal vs. epistemic appearance see Chisholm (1957) and Jackson (1977).

SR: For any conscious intentional state φ with qualitative character Q , φ has Q just in virtue of (suitably) representing itself to have first-order representational properties $R1, R2, \dots, Rn$.¹⁵

For example, your conscious heat sensation gets its burning-heat-like qualitative character in virtue of representing itself to represent burning heat. Since such a self-representation is what *determines* qualitative character, it just cannot be the case that it misses or mischaracterizes it: if φ represents itself to have $R1, R2, \dots, Rn$, and self-representing to have $R1, R2, \dots, Rn$ is what constitutes and thereby fully determines qualitative character, then, necessarily, such a self-representation cannot mischaracterize qualitative character. Accordingly, there is no appearance/reality gap between the way a conscious state phenomenally is and the way it phenomenally appears to be: whenever φ *appears* to have qualitative property Q , φ *does have* Q , because φ 's appearance (i.e. φ 's representing itself to have $R1, R2, \dots, Rn$) *constitutes* and thereby *determines* φ 's phenomenal reality (its qualitative character).

However, although SR does not allow for any appearance/reality gap with respect to qualitative character, it does allow for an appearance/reality gap with respect to *first-order representational properties*. For, on SR, first-order representational properties do not play any constitutive role in determining qualitative character: your experience's *representing heat* does *not* determine the qualitative heat-like aspect of the phenomenology of your sensation. What constitutes such a qualitative aspect is your experience's *representing itself to represent heat*. First-order representation plays, at most, a causal role with respect to qualitative character. Accordingly, it may occur that you experience a heat sensation (i.e. an experience with a heat-like qualitative character) even if what your experience (first-order) represents is, say, coldness. Constituting self-representation thus "screens off" first-order representation and introduces an appearance-reality gap with respect to it (cf. Coleman 2015).

In this new framework, the meta-representation does not determine just qualitative character's existence conditions, but also its identity conditions: self-representation determines not just *that* a conscious intentional state has qualitative character, but also *what* qualitative character it has. Similarly to HOR, first-order representation is, on SR, *explanatorily idle* (Kidd 2011; Coleman 2015; McClelland 2020): the whole explanatory job is done by the mental state's self-representation that fully determines qualitative character. Here too, then, the connection between qualitative character and first-order representation is severed, with the counterintuitive result that the qualitative character of a conscious intentional state does not constitutively depend on what the state represents, but is fully determined by the state's self-representation.

A meta-representationalist may reply that, although first-order representation does not have any constitutive role, it still has a *causal* role, which is *not* explanatorily irrelevant to their model of consciousness. However, such a causal connection does not seem sufficient to meet our intuitions about the role of first-order representation in the constitution of qualitative character. The qualitative character of your experience of the gray sky seems to be (at least partially) *constituted* by your experience's representing the gray sky. Plausibly, your experience *seems* to be so constituted because it *is* so constituted: if your experience *appears* to

¹⁵ Again, I set aside the specification of 'suitably' here.

you to represent gray sky, it does so simply in virtue of its *representing gray sky*, rather than in virtue of *being represented to represent gray sky*. Arguably, if a mental state is represented to represent gray sky this is due to the fact that (i) the experience is represented and (ii) it itself represents gray sky. MR reverses this intuitive *order of constitution*, with the result that whether the experience represents gray sky, blue sky, or anything else is just irrelevant to the constitution of its qualitative character.

Moreover, by reversing the order of constitution, MR misses a straightforward explanation of why, by experiencing something, one is *aware of it*. By having a gray-sky experience, you seem to be aware *of the gray sky*. Plausibly, this is explained by the fact that your experience *represents the sky*: the experience's representing the sky as being gray is what makes you aware of the sky and its grayness. But if first-order representation plays no role in the constitution of qualitative character, this cannot be so. MR seems to imply that your experience only makes you aware of *what and how the experience is represented by you to represent*, and never makes you *genuinely* aware of *what and how the experience itself represents*.

It thus seems that, somewhat similarly to qualia and sense-data theories, MR turns out inadequate to explain the intimate relation between qualitative character and our experiential connection with the world—i.e. our *outer-awareness of the world*. Indeed, it seems to imply that we are *experientially isolated* from the world—by a “veil of meta-representation”. For what meta-representation makes one aware of is one's *mental state*, rather than the world—it constitutes *inner* awareness, rather than *outer* awareness. Accordingly, MR seems to just not have the resources to account for outer awareness. At any rate, on MR, the intuitive connection between qualitative character and outer awareness is lost.¹⁶

So (conversely with respect to FOR), although MR may be a potentially promising account of qualitative character's existence conditions, it is unsatisfactory as an account of its identity conditions, as it fails to do justice to the intuitive connection between qualitative character and awareness of the world—intuition that motivates a representationalist treatment of qualitative character in the first place.

5. Acquaintance Approaches to Qualitative Character

One way to avoid the problems affecting representational approaches is to just drop the idea that awareness of the world consists in *representing* the world and adopt a *non-representational* approach to conscious intentional states' qualitative character, on which qualitative character (and, concomitantly, awareness of the world) is explained not in terms of representation but in terms of the mental relation of acquaintance. The main extant acquaintance-based theory is *relationalism*, which may be seen as a form of *first-order acquaintance theory* of qualitative character. The logical space, however, allows also for a *meta-acquaintance theory* which, by mirroring meta-representationalism, explains qualitative character in terms of *acquaintance with acquaintance*. I consider both options in turn.

5.1 Relationalism (or First-order Acquaintance Theory)

Relationalism (also known as *naïve realism*) is a theory of *perceptual experience*. More specifically, it is a theory of *veridical* perceptual experience—the experience one

¹⁶ I develop these and other objections to MR in Giustina (2022b).

has when one *perceives* some object in one's environment, as opposed to undergoing a *hallucination* as of some object that is *not* in one's environment. On relationalism, veridical perception fundamentally consists in the subject's bearing an experiential relation—the *perceptual relation*—to objects in their environment and (some of) their properties (see, e.g., Campbell 2002; Martin 2002; Fish 2009; Logue 2012). This relation being *direct* (both metaphysically and epistemically), it can plausibly be spelled out in terms of acquaintance: a subject *S* perceives an object *o* (as having property *P*) just in virtue of being *perceptually acquainted* with *o* (and with *P*). So, on relationalism, your veridical visual experience of the gray sky fundamentally consists in your being perceptually acquainted with the gray sky.

Somewhat similarly to FOR, qualitative character is here explained in terms of (first-order) awareness of the world. Unlike FOR, however, relationalism accounts for that awareness not in terms of representation but in terms of acquaintance:

REL: For any veridical conscious perceptual state φ of a subject *S*, such that φ is a perception of an object *o* (as having property *P*) and has qualitative character *Q*, φ has *Q* just in virtue of *S*'s being (perceptually) acquainted with *o* (and/or with *P*).

The idea is that the qualitative character of perceptual states (such as seeing the gray sky) is fully determined by the subject's bearing the acquaintance relation to the perceived objects and their properties. Qualitative character is thus constituted by the subject's awareness of those objects (i.e., perceptual acquaintance) as well as by the objects themselves (and their properties): the grayish qualitative character of your veridical experience of the gray sky is constituted by the gray sky and by your visual awareness of it.¹⁷

So, while discarding the connection between qualitative character and *representational properties*, relationalism nonetheless preserves the gist of the intuition originally motivating positing such a connection: the idea that qualitative character somehow depends on our *awareness of the world*. The objects and properties perceived determine *what* qualitative character a perceptual state has—its identity conditions. The acquaintance relation to those objects and properties determines *that* a perceptual state has qualitative character at all—its existence conditions.

So, like FOR, relationalism does justice to the intuition that qualitative character's identity conditions are determined by first-order awareness of what the experience is directed at; however, unlike FOR, it also has the resources to explain qualitative character's existence conditions: unlike representation, acquaintance can only occur consciously—perceptual acquaintance with some object constitutes *ipso facto* (conscious) qualitative character.

One problem with the relationalist account of qualitative character, however, is that it is restricted to *veridical perceptual states*, and does not seem to be straightforwardly extendible to *all* conscious intentional states. For one thing, *non-veridical* perceptual experiences are typically taken by relationalists to be fundamentally different from veridical perceptions, and *not* to involve a direct experiential relation to objects in one's environment. Although some relational accounts of hallucinations have been proposed (Raleigh 2014; Ali 2018; Masrour 2020), most

¹⁷ I set aside, here, whether it is plausible that worldly objects and their properties can be *constitutive* of qualitative character. I myself do not find it plausible, but my argument against the relationalist account of qualitative character will not hinge on this.

relationalists adopt a *disjunctive* view, such that veridical and non-veridical perceptual experiences have fundamentally different natures.

Regardless of the prospects for a relationalist account of hallucination, the scope of conscious intentional states seems to outstrip that of (veridical or non-veridical) *perceptual* experiences and include, at least, *imaginative* experiences, *emotional* experiences, *recollections*, *thoughts* and *desires*. Arguably, all these experiences are *intentional*—they are directed toward some object—and their qualitative character is (partly) determined by their intentional content. One may imagine *a flying pig*, fear *a snake*, recall *one's childhood home*, think of *one's partner*, desire *sushi*; the content of each contributes to determining its qualitative character (what it is like to imagine a flying pig is different from what it is like to imagine a walking whale, and at least part of the difference is due to *what* is imagined in each case). However, none of these experiences involves *perceiving* the object it is directed at, and nobody has yet shown how the relationalist account could be extended to all of them.¹⁸

It may be pointed out that, for at least some of these experiences, a *perceptual* account is available. Some theories of *emotions*, for example, construe emotions as perceptions (as) of evaluative properties (e.g., fear of a snake as perceiving the snake as *dangerous*) (Tye 2008b; Mendelovici 2014; Tappolet 2016; Mitchell 2020). Some *imaginative experiences*—those involved in *mental imagery*—are often described as *perception-like* (see, e.g., Kind 2001; Noordhof 2002; Nanay 2015). However, first, such perceptual theories typically assume a *representational* account of perceptual experience (rather than a relational account) and construe the relevant experiences as perceptual (or perception-like) *representations*. Second, at least for some of those experiences, a relationalist treatment just does not seem available. Even admitting that *fitting* emotions (e.g. fear of a poisonous snake) could be construed as perceptions of mind-independent evaluative properties (e.g. the snake's dangerousness)—which is already controversial—*unfitting* emotions (e.g. fear of a puppy) certainly *cannot* be construed that way. Besides, imaginative experience just *is* a kind of experience directed at things that are not present and may not even exist; so, obviously, it just cannot be constituted by a direct perceptual relation to worldly objects in one's environment. Recollection is also, by its own nature, a kind of mental state that is directed at things or events that are *past* and thus, obviously, not perceivable in one's current environment. Similar considerations apply to thought: we can (and often do) think about things that we do not currently perceive. It is indeed one of the essential differences between (veridical) perception on the one hand, and thought, imagination, and memory on the other hand, that the former but not the latter requires the presence of its intentional object. Finally, desire just does not have the right direction of fit to be accounted for in perceptual terms.

A relationalist may reply that, even though those experiences do not involve a *perceptual* relation to objects in one's environment, they can still be accounted for in terms of first-order (relationalist) acquaintance, if the theory is supplied with the right metaphysical account of *what* one is (supposedly) acquainted with in

¹⁸ Although for some of these mental states (notably thoughts and desires) it is controversial whether they have qualitative character, essentially everybody agrees that there is more qualitative character in the world than perceptual qualitative character. Arguably, at least imaginative experiences, emotional experiences, and recollections can safely be assumed to have qualitative character.

each case. Plausibly, the relationalist would have to maintain that in imagination one is acquainted with *possibilia*; in recollection, with *past events*; in emotion, with *values*. However, first, this comes with heavy and controversial metaphysical commitments—with Lewisian modal realism, eternalism, and moral realism respectively—that add to the (already controversial) perceptual case’s commitment to realism about the properties in the manifest image. Second, even admitting that those objects exist, it is not fully clear that one can be *acquainted* with them. Third, arguably, for each kind of object of acquaintance, a different type of acquaintance relation would have to be postulated (imaginative acquaintance, recollective acquaintance, emotional acquaintance, etc.); this implies a disunified and implausible multiplication of acquaintance-relation types. Fourth, even if this were an acceptable account of *good cases* of non-perceptual experiences (successful imaginings, correct recollections, fitting emotions, etc.), an account of *bad cases* would still be missing.

So, even if relationalism could offer a satisfactory account of the qualitative character of veridical perception (an issue that I have not addressed but is far from being established), it is just not plausibly extendible to the qualitative character of *all* conscious intentional states. A relationalist is forced to either (i) offer a disjunctive theory, such that the qualitative character of perception is explained in relationalist terms, while that of all other experiences is explained otherwise (in which case an account of non-perceptual experiences’ qualitative character is still due), or (ii) offer an implausible first-order acquaintance theory of qualitative character, one that is full of controversial metaphysical commitments and implies a disunified panoply of acquaintance-relation types.

5.2 The Meta-Acquaintance Theory

By mirroring the distinction between first-order representationalism and meta-representationalism, we may distinguish, within the acquaintance approach, a *first-order acquaintance theory* (i.e., relationalism) and a *meta-acquaintance theory* (MA). Like MR, MA puts an *inner awareness* requirement on qualitative character; but, unlike MR, MA construes inner awareness as (meta-)acquaintance—rather than as (meta-)representation. A possible version of MA attributes qualitative character’s identity conditions to first-order (perceptual) acquaintance and its existence conditions to (inner) acquaintance with first-order acquaintance:

MA: For any veridical conscious perceptual state φ of a subject S , such that φ is a perception of an object o (as having property P) and has qualitative character Q , (i) φ has Q rather than some other qualitative character just in virtue of S ’s bearing the relation of (perceptual) acquaintance ρ to o (and/or to P) and (ii) φ has Q rather than no qualitative character just in virtue of S ’s being (innerly) acquainted with ρ .

As it stands, though, MA just inherits relationalism’s *extendibility problem*. Moreover, since first-order acquaintance can, by itself, account for qualitative character’s existence conditions, meta-acquaintance seems to be superfluous.

However, a variant of MA may be developed, on which qualitative character’s existence is determined by meta-acquaintance, its identity is determined by first-order awareness, but the latter is spelled out not in terms of perceptual acquaintance, but in terms of some other relation, one that is extendible to non-perceptual conscious intentional states. This is exactly what ARA aims to do.

6. The Acquaintance-Representational Account Refined

The acquaintance-representational account (ARA) is a *hybrid* account that explains the qualitative character of conscious intentional states partly in terms of their representational properties and partly in terms of (meta-)acquaintance:

ARA: For any subject *S* and conscious intentional state φ of *S*, such that φ has representational properties $R1, R2, \dots, Rn$ and qualitative character *Q*, φ has *Q* in virtue of (i) having $R1, R2, \dots, Rn$ and (ii) *S*'s being acquainted with $R1, R2, \dots, Rn$.

Like MA, ARA accounts for qualitative character's *identity conditions* in terms of *outer (or first-order) awareness*, and for its *existence conditions* in terms of *inner awareness*. Similarly to MA, inner awareness is spelled out in terms of (meta-)acquaintance. Differently from MA, however, outer awareness is spelled out not in terms of first-order acquaintance, but in terms of first-order representation. A more precise version of ARA is thus:

ARA_(ref): For any subject *S* and conscious intentional state φ of *S*, such that φ has first-order representational properties $R1, R2, \dots, Rn$ and qualitative character *Q*, (i) φ has *Q* rather than some other qualitative character just in virtue of having $R1, R2, \dots, Rn$ and (ii) φ has *Q* rather than no qualitative character just in virtue of *S*'s being acquainted with $R1, R2, \dots, Rn$.

The idea is that representational properties determine *what* qualitative character a conscious intentional state has (i.e., what makes the difference between, say, seeing the gray sky and tasting chocolate), while acquaintance with such representational properties makes it the case *that* a conscious intentional state has qualitative character—it makes those representational properties *phenomenally apparent*: it is that in virtue of which representational properties come to constitute an aspect of *phenomenal character*. If a mental state has representational properties $R1, R2, \dots, Rn$ but its subject is *not* acquainted with $R1, R2, \dots, Rn$, then the mental state does not have any qualitative character. However, acquaintance does not determine *what* qualitative character a conscious intentional state has: that is fully determined by the state's representational properties.

By way of a metaphor, we may say that acquaintance “illuminates” a mental state's representational properties, thereby making them phenomenally apparent to the subject—this is what makes them constitute *qualitative character*. Without acquaintance, such representational properties are “in the dark”—they are unconscious.

6.1 ARA vs. Representational and Relational Approaches

ARA avoids the problems affecting other views while preserving their virtues.

Like on FOR, on ARA first-order representational properties account for qualitative character's identity conditions. This secures the intuitive connection between the kind of qualitative character an intentional state has and what the state is directed at (its intentional content). Unlike FOR (and similarly to MR), however, on ARA first-order representation is not sufficient for qualitative character: inner awareness of such a representation is also required. This endows ARA with the resources to account for qualitative character's existence conditions: a

conscious intentional state φ has qualitative character at all in virtue of its subject's being acquainted with φ 's first-order representational properties.

ARA is also immune to the problems affecting MR. As noted, ARA's strategy is in some respects similar to MR's initial strategy: accounting for qualitative character's identity conditions in terms of first-order representation and for its existence conditions in terms of inner awareness of that first-order representation; while on MR inner awareness is spelled out in terms of (meta-)representation, on ARA it is spelled out in terms of (meta-)acquaintance. However, as noted, MR's original strategy is ultimately unstable: in fact, first-order representation does not play a constitutive role in determining qualitative character (it plays at most a causal role) and the whole explanatory work is done by meta-representation. This has the undesired result of detaching qualitative character from (first-order) awareness of the world. ARA, by contrast, preserves the constitutive connection between qualitative character and first-order representation, while providing an account of qualitative character's existence conditions in terms of awareness of first-order representation.

Finally, while appealing to the notion of acquaintance, ARA does not incur the extendibility problem affecting relationalism. While, on relationalism, qualitative character is fully determined by *perceptual* acquaintance, on ARA it is determined partly by *inner* acquaintance and partly by first-order representation. On the one hand, inner acquaintance is a relation that a subject can bear to *any* of their own mental states (regardless of the kind it belongs to—perceptual, emotional, imaginative, etc.) and is thus *not* restricted to perceptual experiences. On the other hand, unlike direct perception of worldly objects, first-order representation is a feature that *any* conscious intentional state has—not just veridical perceptual states. Unlike relationalism, ARA can offer a *unified* account of qualitative character, while avoiding any controversial metaphysical commitment with respect to the objects of imagination, recollection, emotion, etc., as well as any multiplication of acquaintance-relation types (the only type of acquaintance relation postulated by ARA is *inner* acquaintance). Like relationalism, however, ARA ensures that acquaintance with some mental state constitutes *ipso facto* (conscious) qualitative character; for inner acquaintance, like perceptual acquaintance, can only occur consciously.

6.2 Toward Articulating the Details of the Acquaintance-Representational Account

What we have so far is the *general form* of the acquaintance-representational account. For a *full, specific* and more *substantial* account, various details need to be filled out, especially about (i) the kind of *representational properties* that determine qualitative character's identity, (ii) the nature of the *acquaintance relation* that determines its *existence*, and (iii) the *metaphysical structure* of acquaintance with representational properties. A complete exploration of such details outstrips the scope of one single paper: here I just offer a quick preliminary sketch of some of the most relevant options.

As for (i), since qualitative character's identity conditions are fully determined by representational properties, one will need to plug into ARA one's preferred version of (first-order) representationalism. The range of options is quite wide and thoroughly explored in the literature. Some of the crucial decision points concern:

- (a) *Pure vs. impure* representationalism: are qualitative character's identity conditions given just by representational content (pure representationalism), or also by representational attitude (impure representationalism)?
- (b) *Wide vs. narrow* representational properties: are the representational properties that determine qualitative character dependent only on the internal state of the subject (narrow representational properties) or also on the subject's environment (wide representational properties)?
- (c) *Russellian vs. Fregean* content: is the representational content that contributes to determining qualitative character Russellian (i.e., constituted by worldly objects and their properties) or Fregean (i.e., constituted by modes of presentation)?
- (d) *Conceptual vs. non-conceptual* content: is such a representational content conceptual or non-conceptual?

To every possible combination of choices corresponds a different version of ARA.

While the debate around representational properties has reached quite a fine-grained level of detail, with well-organized decision points and articulated arguments to weigh each position, the debate around the nature of acquaintance is comparatively much more immature. Indeed, when it comes to ARA, most of the work yet to be done pertains (ii) the nature of the acquaintance relation. One option is to construe acquaintance as a *primitive* and irreducible mental relation of direct awareness, and its special properties (metaphysical directness, epistemic directness, and relata-entailment) as brute facts. Another option is to try to develop a more informative account, one that aims at analyzing acquaintance in terms of more fundamental elements and/or relations. For example, it has been suggested that acquaintance depends on a *constitutive* relation between what one is acquainted with and a mental state of the subject (Gertler 2001; Chalmers 2003; Balog 2012; Coleman 2015; Williford 2015; Giustina 2021). Brie Gertler (2001), for instance, proposes a *demonstrative* account, on which acquaintance with a mental state occurs via a *pure demonstrative* (i.e., a demonstrative without descriptive component) that is related to the experience it refers to by a constitutive (rather than causal) relation.¹⁹ On Gertler's view, one is acquainted with one's current mental state token M iff one has an occurrent mental state token M^* which is such that: (1) M is *embedded* in M^* (i.e., M^* cannot be present if M is not also present and M can be present even if M^* is not present); (2) M^* *refers* to M ; and (3) it is the case that (2) because it is the case that (1). Acquaintance is thus analyzed in terms of the more basic notions of *embedding* and *reference*. In a similar vein, Sam Coleman (2015) has developed a *quotational* account, on which, when S is acquainted with a first-order state M , M is taken up by a higher-order thought via a mental operation analogous to linguistic quotation, by which the higher-order thought "displays" the first-order state thereby making it conscious. These are some of the few models of the nature of acquaintance that have been proposed—just to give a sense of the kind of direction considerations pertaining (ii) should take. Much more work needs to be done to get a rich and thoroughly developed range of options.²⁰

As for (iii), options vary partly depending on the theorist's stance on (ii). If acquaintance is just a primitive relation between a subject and (some of) its

¹⁹ Gertler, however, proposes this as a model of *introspective* acquaintance, rather than of acquaintance in general.

²⁰ I take some steps toward developing my own account in Giustina (forthcoming).

representational properties, then, arguably, that is all that can be said about its metaphysical structure. If, instead, acquaintance depends on some more fundamental relation between mental states M and M^* of the subject, a variety of options present themselves. First, are M and M^* distinct mental states, or are they the same state? Somewhat mirroring meta-representationalist views, we may here distinguish a *higher-order acquaintance view*, on which $M \neq M^*$, and a *self-acquaintance view*, on which $M = M^*$. Second, if $M \neq M^*$, are they fully distinct or do they overlap? At least three options are available here: (1) M and M^* are separate mental states (in this case the special relation between them just primitively entails the existence of both); (2) M and M^* partially overlap; (3) M is embedded in M^* (cf. Figure 1). If instead $M = M^*$, what is the kind of relation that M bears to itself, in virtue of which S is acquainted with M (cf. Figure 2)? Third, if the relation between M and M^* is constitutive, what kind of constitution is at play (mereological, material...)?

These and many other questions need to be answered to get a full acquaintance-representational account of qualitative character. Here I have just argued for a *general* form of the acquaintance-representational account, and hinted at some of the issues that need to be addressed to build up a complete account.

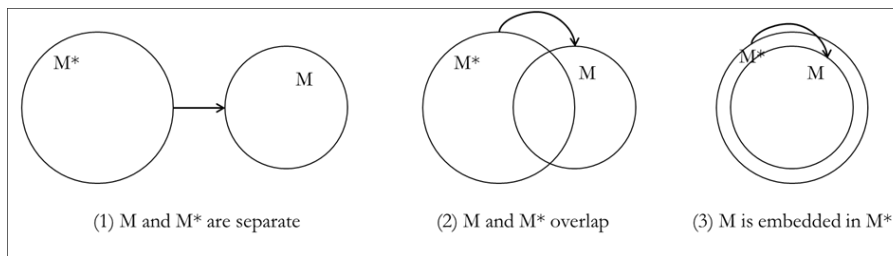


Figure 1: Possible versions of the higher-order acquaintance view

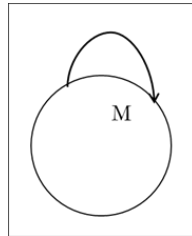


Figure 2: The self-acquaintance view

7. Conclusion

Many more details need to be filled out to articulate a complete inner acquaintance theory of consciousness and phenomenal character. In particular, much more work needs to be done to spell out the nature and metaphysical structure of acquaintance. Here I offered a sketch of what seems to me the most promising way for an inner acquaintance theory to account for the qualitative character of conscious intentional states. I proposed a hybrid acquaintance-representational account, on which a conscious intentional state has qualitative character in virtue of (i) having the representational properties it does and (ii) its subject being acquainted with such representational properties. I have tried to show that the acquaintance-representational account of qualitative character is not only suitable

for an inner acquaintance theory of consciousness, but also superior to its representational and relational competitors. Developing the details of the acquaintance-representational account (concerning the kind of representational properties involved, the nature of the acquaintance relation, and the metaphysical structure of acquaintance with representational properties) still needs to be the object of further work. I hope to have shown that such further work is worth pursuing.²¹

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²¹ For extensive comments on a previous draft I am very grateful to Uriah Kriegel.

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