
Representationalisms, Subjective Character, and Self-Acquaintance

Kenneth Williford

In this study I argue for the following claims: First, it's best to think of subjective character as the self-acquaintance of each instance of consciousness—its acquaintance with itself. Second, this entails that all instances of consciousness have some intrinsic property in virtue of which they, and not other things, bear this acquaintance relation to themselves. And, third, this is still compatible with physicalism as long as we accept something like *in re* structural universals; consciousness is a real, multiply instantiable, natural universal or form, but it likely has a highly complex, articulated structure, and “lives” only in its instances. In order to make these cases, I give a characterization of subjective character that accounts for the intuition that phenomenal consciousness is relational in some sense (or involves a subject-object polarity), as well as the competing and Humean intuition that one of the supposed relata, the subject-relatum, is not phenomenologically accessible. By identifying the subject with the episode or stream of consciousness itself and maintaining that consciousness is immediately self-aware (“reflexively” aware), these competing intuitions can be reconciled. I also argue that it is a serious confusion to identify subjective character with one's individuality or particularity.

I argue that deeper reflection on the fact that consciousness has only incomplete self-knowledge will allow us to see that certain problems afflicting acquaintance theories, like the one I defend, are not the threats to certain forms of physicalism that they might seem to be. In particular, I briefly consider the Grain Problem and the apparent primitive simplicity of the acquaintance relation itself in this light.

Keywords

Acquaintance | Consciousness | Direct realism | First-order representationalism | For-me-ness | Harder problem | Heidelberg school | Higher-order representationalism | Individuality | Individuation | Intrinsic property | Mineness | Naturalize | Particularity | Phenomenal consciousness | Phenomenal intentionality | Physicalism | Qualitative character | Reflexive awareness | Reflexivity | Relational property | Representation | Representationalism | Same-order representationalism | Self-acquaintance | Self-knowledge | Self-representation | Sense of self | Sense-datum theory | Stream of consciousness | Structural universals | Subject | Subjective-character | The grain problem | Transparency intuition

1 Introduction

In this study, I argue for the following claims: First, it's best to think of subjective character as the self-acquaintance of each instance of consciousness—its acquaintance with itself.¹

¹ As will become clear shortly, contrary to ordinary ways of speaking, I do not hold that persons must be the “subject relata” of acquaintance relations. Rather, I hold that episodes of consciousness are, fundamentally, the subject relata.

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Second, this does indeed entail that all instances of consciousness have some internal relational property (or intrinsic property) in virtue of which they, and not other things, bear this acquaintance relation to themselves. And, third, this is still compatible with physicalism as long as we accept something like *in re* structural universals. There is always a price, but in this case

it's arguably no more than the price we pay to be scientific realists.²

To make these cases, I must consider some important preliminaries. I give a characterization of subjective character that accounts for the intuition that phenomenal consciousness is relational in some sense (or involves a subject-object polarity), as well as the competing Humean intuition that one of the supposed relata, the subject-relatum, is not phenomenologically accessible. If the latter is true, it is hard to explain how we could have immediate evidence (as opposed to some sort of inferential knowledge) of the existence of this relational structure—evidence we do seem to have. If we identify the subject with the episode or stream of consciousness itself (however we individuate or ontologize these)³ and maintain that consciousness is immediately self-aware (“reflexively” aware⁴), then the intuition of relationality and the Humean intuition of the missing subject can be reconciled.

I also argue that it is a serious confusion to identify subjective character with one's individuality or particularity. This will be considered first from a phenomenological point of view, in relation to our tendency to describe subjective character in terms of ownership or “mineness”, and then from an ontological point of view, in relation to the metaphysical individuation conditions of distinct streams of consciousness.

Further, I argue that deeper reflection on the fact that consciousness has only incomplete self-knowledge will allow us to see that certain problems afflicting acquaintance theories, like the one I defend, are not the threats to certain forms of physicalism that they might seem to

be. In particular, I briefly consider the Grain Problem⁵ and the apparent primitive simplicity of the acquaintance relation itself in this light.

Preliminary to all this, we must first briefly consider the inadequacies of representationalism, and at least adumbrate some of the motivations for the recently renewed interest in the idea of acquaintance (see e.g., Chalmers 2003; Tye 2011, pp. 96–102; Gertler 2011, pp. 87–128, 2012; Balog 2012; Howell 2013, chs. 3 & 4; Goff forthcoming). I argue that, indeed, we need to lose our fear of moving beyond reductive naturalistic representationalisms, especially in regard to subjective character. My conclusions, and in many cases arguments, are not entirely new, but I attempt to cast the material in a new light, in a spirit of synthesis.

The dialectical structure of this study is somewhat circuitous. In section 2, I argue that the most plausible representationalist theory of consciousness is a self-representationalist one (or “Same-Order” representationalism) because it captures subjective character, which I view as essential to consciousness, with the smallest theoretical cost. However, I argue, all forms of representationalism about consciousness are ultimately implausible. This leads to a focused discussion of the notion of subjective character in section 3, the notion that motivates higher-order and same-order representationalisms. In that section, I argue that subjective character should be identified with the self-manifestation or self-appearance of consciousness. Consciousness, the claim goes, appears to *itself* no matter what else appears to it. This in turn allows us to make sense of the competing relationality and Humean “no-self” intuitions mentioned above. Combining these elements from sections 2 and 3, I argue in section 4 that we should understand self-manifestation in terms of self-acquaintance rather than self-representation. In section 5, I clear up what I regard to be the not uncommon confusion of subjective character with individuation. And in section 6, I argue

5 The Grain Problem, customarily attributed to Wilfred Sellars, is a problem for any identity theory according to which sensory qualities are really brain properties of some sort. Roughly put, the problem is that brain properties are complex and structured while sensory qualities seem, on the face of it, ultimately simple and unstructured. For good discussions with references to Sellars see Clark (1989) and Lockwood (1993).

2 This is not to imply that scientific realism entails physicalism, of course.

3 This is a difficult issue I will not enter into. See e.g., Dainton (2000, 2008); Strawson (2009).

4 I will occasionally use the terms “reflexivity” and “reflexive awareness” to denote just this characteristic of consciousness (i.e., that of its always being aware of itself). It is not to be confused with “reflection” in the sense of introspection. It is more like the logical usage of “reflexive” (as in “reflexive relation”). The acquaintance relation is reflexive on the domain of conscious states, according to the view accepted here (as well as being anti-symmetric). But not everything that stands in this relation is self-acquainted—episodes of consciousness are, but they are also acquainted with sensory qualities, and these latter are not acquainted with anything.

that though the view espoused here implies that being conscious is a matter of having certain intrinsic properties, this is compatible with a certain type of physicalistically acceptable hylo-morphism—the view that complex kinds of physical objects, properties, or processes involve the concrete instantiation of real structures and cannot be properly understood in abstraction from such a “marriage” of form and matter.

2 Representationalisms: From first-order to same-order

In the theory of consciousness, the term “representationalism” has, aptly but somewhat confusingly from a historical point of view, come to designate any view according to which being phenomenally conscious is equivalent to representing the right sort of things in the right sort of way. There is, of course, much internecine disagreement over these things and ways, but the main idea is simple and attractive enough. If we could understand consciousness in terms of representation and representation in terms of some naturalistically acceptable relations, then we could “naturalize” consciousness. I’ll call representationalisms that are coupled with naturalistic theories of content *reductive representationalisms*.

Representationalisms are typically divided up into various “orders.” These orders have, in a way, to do with the kind of content (or object) a conscious representational state supposedly must have. For First-Order (F) representationalisms the relevant states are, fundamentally, just directed at worldly objects and properties (typically the sensible properties of tables, chairs, etc., see, e.g., [Tye 1995, 2000](#); [Dretske 1995](#)). For Higher-Order (H) representationalisms, the states must be directed at mental states of “lower-order”—possibly but not necessarily first-order (see e.g., [Rosenthal 2005](#); [Lycan 1996](#)). For Same-Order (S) representationalisms, the representational state must be directed at itself (or, perhaps, some part of itself, or a whole of which it is a part, or another part of the whole of which it is a part).⁶ I also add Priv-

ileged-Object (P) representationalisms as a distinct category. For these, the state must be directed at some special type of entity—a model of the organism as a representational or embodied homeostatic system, a “proto-self” or, less naturalistically, perhaps an enduring substantial ego entity.⁷

There is, however, no obvious reason why there could not be unconscious representations with any of these contents. And, generally, it seems implausible that something could be conscious in virtue of representing a certain type of object—this is Alvin Goldman’s so-called “Problem of the Rock” (thinking about or seeing rocks does not make them conscious, so why should it make anything else conscious?), which seems to apply to H, S, and P theories—but see below (see e.g., [Goldman 1993](#); [Gennaro 2005](#); [Lycan ms](#)).

For F theories, since it is admitted there can be conscious and unconscious states with the same sort of content, another distinguisher between conscious and unconscious mental states will have to be found. For F theorists, this has typically been a functional constraint placed on the representations (e.g., poise, feeding into the mind-reading system, becoming available to the global workspace, see, e.g., [Tye 2000](#) and relatedly [Baars 1997](#); [Dehaene & Naccache 2001](#)), sometimes coupled with the necessary condition that the properties represented must be represented in a “non-conceptual” way (whatever that is taken to amount to).⁸ For the H theorists, it has been a somewhat different story.

H theorists are generally motivated by a phenomenological inadequacy they see in F the-

theorist. S theory is also often called self-representationalism.

⁷ For naturalistic versions, see e.g., [Damasio \(1999 and 2010\)](#), [Metzinger \(2004\)](#), and [Sebastian \(forthcoming\)](#). I am sure that Damasio, Metzinger, and Sebastian would reject this label, but the point of it is that all these theories identify subjective consciousness, in one way or another, with the representation of a “self,” understood in a naturalistically acceptable sense. See e.g., [Metzinger \(2004\)](#), p. 302: “In short, a self-model is a model of the very representational system that is currently activating it within itself” (emphasis original); and [Damasio \(2010\)](#), p. 180: “[T]he brain constructs consciousness by generating a self process within an awake mind. The essence of the self is a focusing of the mind on the material organism that it inhabits.” It should be noted that Metzinger allows that there could be conscious experience that does not involve subjective character (see [Metzinger 2004](#), pp. 559-560). Thus my categorization here applies at most only to his theory of subjective consciousness. Since, for me (as for Damasio), all consciousness necessarily has subjective character, this difference in detail will not loom large in what follows.

⁸ See the excellent discussion of the “non-conceptual content” literature in [Hopp \(2011\)](#).

⁶ See e.g., [Gennaro \(2012\)](#); [Kriegel \(2006, 2009\)](#); [Weisberg \(2008, 2014\)](#). [Williford \(2006\)](#) can be taken to express a pure S view—the conscious mental state has itself for its own object, not some portion of itself. We can also classify Carruthers as an S theorist; see [Carruthers \(2000, 2005\)](#). Gennaro would not describe himself as an S

ory. F theorists generally stress the so-called “Transparency Intuition”—the idea, roughly put, that first-order consciousness reveals only properties and objects in the world and nothing directly about consciousness itself, the perceiving mind, the subject, or the vehicles of representation (see e.g., Harman 1990; Tye 2000; Byrne 2001). H theorists, on the other hand, are with varying degrees of explicitness motivated by the equally powerful intuition that consciousness involves some sort of “for-me-ness” or “to-me-ness,” often termed “subjective character” (see e.g., Rosenthal 1986, p. 345 and Gennaro 2006. See also Levine 2001, pp. 104–111). This gets encoded in the H mantra that the conscious states are just those that one is “Aware of Being In”, those that one is aware that one is oneself in (see e.g., the “Introduction” to Kriegel & Williford 2006). The thought is that F theory simply does not capture that intuition. F theorists and their fellow travelers would consider such “essentially indexical” contents or the “sense of self” to be more advanced cognitive products or artifacts of social cognition, certainly not in the very ground floor of consciousness (see e.g., Edelman & Tononi 2000, pp. 103–104 and Macphail 1998, pp. 2–5).

There is here an important bifurcation in intuitions about consciousness. Some significant percentage of us thinks that subjective character (however we ultimately understand it) is essential to consciousness, is in the ground floor. And some significant percentage of us thinks that it is not; that somehow qualitative character (perhaps understood as having the right sort of representational content) is essential but that subjective character is derived, secondary, or tertiary. This bifurcation shows up in neuroscientific and psychological thinking on consciousness as well.⁹ We will briefly return to the significance of this bifurcation point in the next section.

The H theorist has a few options about the exact content of the H representation, the higher-order thought (or perception [or global state]).¹⁰ There are serious and well-known

problems here. If the represented lower-order state (L state) of, say, visual perceptual awareness were different from the representing H state in terms of relevant content (e.g., if the one represents a phenomenally green ball and the other a phenomenally red one), what would we consciously see? “Red. No, green. No, red...” This is the Problem of the Division of Phenomenal Labor, or mirepresentation problem, as I will sometimes call it, and is related to deep and probably insoluble problems about the epistemology of introspection that are pertinent to such models (of both H and S varieties).¹¹ If the L state simply did not exist, would your conscious experience in that case be a sort of Meinongian hallucination? This is the Problem of Targetless H States.¹²

To take up the latter problem just a bit, if one takes literally much of the talk one finds in the literature on H theory, the H thought is supposed to *make* the L state conscious. Being conscious is a kind of extrinsic (external relational) property of the L state, a property it has in virtue of its being represented by the H state. Thus, if there is such an H state, it does confer at least a relational property (the property of “being made conscious by the H state”) on the L state. In the cases in which the L state does not exist but the H state directed at it does, some non-existent object, the L state, is made conscious by an H state. Thus the L state would literally have a relational property; it would stand in a relation, even though it does not exist. This literal interpretation of the view entails some form of Meinongianism (at least about non-existent L states) and that you can seem to yourself to be conscious when you are not. Thus, presumably, it should not be taken so literally.¹³

¹¹ See e.g., Neander (1998); Horgan & Kriegel (2007); Weisberg (2008); Tye (2011, pp. 4–8). See Kidd (ms) for an excellent discussion of these epistemological issues in the (not interestingly different) case of S theory.

¹² See Mandik (2009 and forthcoming) on the “Unicorn problem” and Block (2011). See Rosenthal (2011, 2012); Weisberg (2011a, 2011b); Kiefer (2012); Wilberg (2010), and Berger (2013) for discussions of various strategies for dealing with Higher-Order-Thoughts (HOTs) without Lower-Order-Thoughts (LOTs).

¹³ What I am calling the “non-literal” interpretation is, in effect, the position in Berger (2013). And in Rosenthal (2011, p. 436) he in effect claims that the non-literal position (as I am calling it) has always been his view. See Mandik (forthcoming) on this.

⁹ For example, Tononi & Koch (2008, pp. 240–241) do not seem to think that the “sense of self” is essential (though Tononi (2014) may have recently changed his view); Damasio (1999, 2010) is in the opposing camp; see also Northoff (2013).

¹⁰ I’ll not go into the Higher-Order Thought vs. Higher-Order Perception debate. See e.g., Gennaro (2012).

The non-literal interpretation, however, is inimical to one of the reductive pretensions of the H strategy. It's not inimical to reductive representationalism as such. But it does draw in to question the idea that a reductive theory must construe the property of being conscious as an external-relational property of otherwise unconscious mental states (see [Rosenthal 1997](#)). Thus, it could only be in virtue of the specific content or structure of the H state itself that there is consciousness. One would then be putting forth the presumably phenomenologically motivated *a posteriori* identity hypothesis that the conscious representational states are just the ones with that content. There may be differences over the specific content (e.g., Is it about some of my other mental states, or is it just about the non-mental objects and properties of the world?) and differences over other criteria (e.g., poise); but otherwise, on the non-literal interpretation, H theory is structurally just like F theory. We can of course wed either of these to a reductive theory of representation, but this will only make "being conscious" into an external-relational property to the extent that the theory of representation adopted makes all representation an external-relational matter.

If one is still conscious when the L state does not exist, then the H state would seem to be doing all the work. And that's what we should focus our explanatory efforts on. What could be special about it? Again, putting aside other types of external relations (e.g., being available to the global workspace), it must have a special sort of content. But it is not in virtue of *being represented* that a state could be conscious. Rather, on this non-literal interpretation, it is in virtue of *being a representation of X* (where *X* is a special object of some sort, e.g., oneself being in a state) or *that p* (where *p* is a proposition with a special content) that the state is conscious; and we can, as with any other sort of contentful state, try to figure out how different naturalistic theories of representation would construe states with that content.

Whatever theory of content we adopt, we'll want to know what salient or interesting properties, from an explanatory point of view, such representations have. What is it about you

that you can represent yourself as being in a state or that a conscious state of yours is occurring now? Find that out, the promise goes, and we will understand consciousness. But, I would argue, none of the theories of representation we have to go on tell us anything very significant about such states. The beaver's tail splash, says Millikan, to take one sort of example, can represent the very time at which it occurs (among other things; [Millikan 1995](#), p. 98). This does not make it conscious. This particular example applies directly to Same-Order theories, but surely the beaver's tail splash *could have* represented a previous tail splash and its content or its simultaneous front paw splash, etc., but that would not in itself make anything conscious either, right?

Naturalistic theories of representation will not themselves tell us anything that interestingly distinguishes H states (or S states) from F states (or P states for that matter). In every case (F, H, S, P), it is just a matter of some physical representational vehicles standing in some set of external (or externally mediated) relations to other physical objects (and sometimes to themselves). From this point of view, we see nothing that interestingly distinguishes the theories.

Moved by these problems, H theorists might try to go the "essential indexical" route (cf. [Weisberg 2012](#)). After all, on Rosenthal's original formulation, the conscious states are those one is aware of *oneself* as being in. But here they are faced with a difficult choice. If they presuppose a teleosemantic theory, then they have to face the fact that on this theory there are no literally *essential* indexicals (see e.g., [Millikan 1990](#)). Change the relevant history and other external relations and you change the content—now an indexical, now a proper name, now a substance term, etc. If they abandon teleosemantics, they could go back down some Fregean rabbit hole.¹⁴ That way lies murk or perhaps triviality (see [Cappelen & Dever 2013](#)). But it seems inadequate just to postulate that

¹⁴ I assume here but will not argue that teleosemantics is the most plausible naturalistic theory of content. There may be other naturalistic options that allow one to make good sense of the notion of essential indexicality in a way that could help H theory here, but I doubt it.

the H state contains a definite description that happens to pick oneself out. Thus the H theorist might be led to consider what is in effect a P theory. One then tries to find a suitable entity to play the role of the privileged object (a privileged signified, if you will): the proto-self, the self-model, or what have you.¹⁵

It is hard to see how any of these possible objects would somehow help us to make sense of subjective character. And it is hard to see how representing some special object could be that in virtue of which something is conscious. If “essentially indexical” content is either explicable in terms of something more basic (as seems to be the case to me), or impossible (as on teleosemantics), or metaphysically fraught in an ultimately un-illuminating way, then it seems like the best bet is to adopt a version of S theory.

For one thing, we can reduce the metaphysical load that threatens to plague the notion of essential indexicality and solve the non-existence problem at once.¹⁶ All we need are token mental states representing themselves. As a corollary, we can give a deflationary account of “essentially indexical” content in token-reflexive terms¹⁷ that is potentially compatible with teleosemantics (or whatever non-Fregean account one prefers) and find some other way to capture the grain of truth reflected in the opacity arguments presented by Castañeda, Lewis, and Perry.¹⁸ In my view, anyone committed to the intuition motivating H theory should become an S theorist, if for no other reason than because of the non-existent L state problem. The other possible solutions (e.g., Gennaro’s “WIV”) introduce a kind of theoretical inelegance that renders them less plausible.

H theories are better than F theories, given my intuitions anyway, because they en-

code the essentiality of subjective character to consciousness. If that intuition is good then, of the two classes, H theories are the better ones. But H theories face the non-existent L state problem. To solve it, they must either embrace murk or metaphysical baggage (if they go in the direction of some P theories), or embrace the postulation of certain epicycles, or go some order. S, in my view, is evidently the best option for the representationalist.

S theory avoids *ad hoc* moves, better reflects the clarified phenomenological intuitions that are the real motivation, can ground a theory of indexicals, and does not commit one to an enduring self-entity of any sort; nor does it seem to attempt to get subjective character out of something’s representation of something else that is structurally similar to itself, as this last move runs afoul of the Fichte-Shoemaker Regress.¹⁹ S theory evidently does not fall prey to the non-existent L state problem, even if it does not avoid the misrepresentation problem. In the end, however, it is itself nothing more than a type of P theory. The Privileged Object is just the token mental state (or episode) itself. Clearly, there is no self-evident reason why something’s representing itself should make it conscious, even if it is in fact true that all conscious episodes do represent themselves.

We surely cannot seriously imagine that consciousness emanates from a special object it needs to look at, even if that object is just the current experiential time-slice itself. Further, something’s representation of itself, naturalistically understood, is no more theoretically inter-

¹⁹ See Henrich (1982); Frank (2002, 2007); Shoemaker (1968). The issue, which is part of the “essential indexical” problematic, is, when put into a “self-model theory” context (which is not to be identified with Metzinger’s views), just that modeling something structurally isomorphic to oneself is not sufficient for knowledge that one is modeling oneself, as opposed to having behavioral control through such an interface (I could be controlling my doppelgänger unwittingly and just as effectively). One would need to know that the thing modeled is oneself (and not something else that happens to be isomorphic to it, like one’s counterpart in a close possible world). One cannot, on pain of regress, derive such knowledge from a set of descriptions of oneself without already knowing that at least one of the descriptions does indeed apply to oneself. So one must have some direct self-knowledge, such as knowledge by acquaintance that one is the relevant so-and-so. An S theory wedded to a teleosemantic theory of representation and externalist theory of justification has the advantage of being able to accommodate direct reference and non-inferential knowledge of oneself, though one will regard this as a mere simulacrum of the phenomenology.

¹⁵ See Sebastian (forthcoming) for a Damasio-inspired turn toward a P theory (at least, that was my interpretation of it).

¹⁶ We can’t eliminate the misrepresentation problem, however. But we bracket that for now. See Kidd (ms) and Weisberg (2008).

¹⁷ A la Higginbotham (2003 and 2010) and before that (implicitly) Smullyan (1984); see Cappelen & Dever (2013, pp. 160-161). The hyperset model in Williford (2006) is the skeleton of such a theory. See also Kapitan (2006).

¹⁸ See Cappelen & Dever (2013, ch. 10). They attempt to capture this grain by appealing to relatively un-puzzling epistemic limitations. I believe they are on the right track, even if I would characterize the specific limitations in question a bit differently (see the discussion below on our ignorance of what fundamentally individuates us).

esting (or even surprising) than its representation of the world or of one's other thoughts and perceptions. Thus, that does not, *a priori*, appear to be the sort of thing that would be more likely to be equivalent to consciousness than something's representation of something else. Perhaps adding functional constraints would help here but no more than it might help H or F theory.

Even if it is true that all conscious states are self-representational, it is, of course, far from clear how that fact should help us *explain* consciousness. The same can be said for H theory and other P theories. Rather, in all these accounts, we are merely trying to isolate what we take the unique content of consciousness to be and then to apply our theory of representation to states with such content. Absent some strong phenomenological intuitions to the contrary, the conscious mental states, it seems, might well have been all and only those states in which dogs are represented. In the end, though, all "normal" physicalists (i.e., those who reject Russellian Monism, Panpsychism, and Pan-proto-psychism) are reduced to *some* such strategy. All "normal" physicalists, representationalist or not, will identify consciousness with something that is not *a priori* known to be equivalent to it. We return briefly to this familiar problematic at the end.

But, perhaps most alarmingly, reductive S theories (and H theories, and everything in between) are either subject to a version of the old Swampman objection or otherwise untenable.²⁰ Since the conscious states are, on the theory, just special representational states, they are subject to the constraints of the underlying theory of representation (in this case, teleosemantics). If they don't have the right history, then they don't have the right content. And if they don't have the right content, they are not conscious. Surely there is something simply absurd about the idea that one might or might not be conscious depending on how one's atoms happened to get into the current arrangement.

²⁰ See e.g., Tye (2000, ch. 6). I will not be able to go into the back and forth over Swampman. Suffice it to say that despite hearing many attempted rejoinders over the years, I still find the objection to be a *reductio* of representationalist theories of consciousness wedded to historico-externalist theories of content.

It is not that one cannot concoct a response to the objection; it is, rather, just the very fact that the view invites such objections in the first place. It demands a rather serious and ugly epicycle; and that counts strongly against it. But if we reject teleosemantics and adopt an internalist theory so as to escape from Swampman, we face equally difficult problems that we cannot, unfortunately, go into here.²¹

The view then is that H theories are better than F theories on phenomenological grounds and that S theories are better than H theories on dialectical *and* phenomenological grounds. But all versions wedded to naturalistic historico-externalist theories of representation are shipwrecked on the Swampman problem, and internalist versions face other equally difficult problems. What then shall we do?

We might consider trying out a non-reductive representationalist version of S theory. This is a possibility we will return to in section 4. But first we need to reflect a bit on what H, S, and P theories are trying to capture in the first place. What is the phenomenological datum designated by this phrase "subjective character," and why is it that F (and related) theorists don't see it as essential to consciousness, while H, S, and some other theorists do?

3 Subjective character

Subjective character is often described as a certain "for-me-ness," "mineness," or even "me-ishness" that is phenomenologically manifest and, presumably, always accompanying, even if in a muted or background form, any consciousness whatsoever (see e.g., Zahavi 2005; Levine 2001; Kriegel 2009 and Block 1995). F and related theorists point out that it also seems that one can become so absorbed in one's actions, at one extreme, and perhaps so dulled at the other that one loses all sense of oneself (see e.g., Tononi & Koch 2008, pp. 240–241). Moreover, they might argue that it does not seem reasonable to suppose that worms and bees have a

²¹ See e.g., Carruthers (2000, 2005) and Gennaro (2012, pp. 45–49). Briefly, the sort of functional role semantics Carruthers embraces derives actual, occurrent content from dispositions, and it is actually subject to variations on the Swampman theme.

sense of self at all, and yet they may be conscious. A common reply from the defenders of subjective character to the first claim is that we are not talking about focusing on oneself or one's current mental state as an object of attention or concern, and that, if they tried harder, F theorists would realize that even in the most dulled or, at the other pole, absorbed state, they are still aware at some level of themselves (or the very experiential state they are in). To the second objection, the typical reply is that the sort of subjective character we are envisaging does not require the sort of conceptual sophistication or reflective capabilities that would make it impossible for dogs (or even bees and worms) to count as conscious beings (see e.g., [Gennaro 2012](#), chs. 7 & 8). Of course, the replies can be replied to, and so on. And we won't enter into these debates here. Suffice it to say that, unsurprisingly, those who think that subjective character is essential to consciousness have ways of answering objections, just as do those who deny its essentiality. As commonly happens, the answers drive us back to questions that are themselves at least as hard to settle as the ones we began with. Moreover, appeals to the neuroscientific and psychological literature in the attempt to decide these issues sometimes get what plausibility they have from interpretations of the experiments and results that are as questionable as the claims they are supposed to support.

My view here is that one should follow the modeling path inspired by one's "phenomenological muse" and give up fighting phenomenological intuition wars. If you find subjective character to be essential, develop models of consciousness that encode that, and see where they lead. If you don't find it essential but find other things to be more important (multimodal information integration or availability in the global workspace or whatever), model those. And let's not forget that we might all be working on different parts of the same elephant, so perhaps we will be able to combine models fruitfully one day. Eventually we may have ways of more or less decisively testing the different models.²²

²² See [Kriegel \(2007\)](#) for an excellent discussion of phenomenological impasses. Thanks to Jennifer Windt for reminding me of this lucid article.

Different intuitions about what is essential to a phenomenon drive different models of the phenomenon. As long as enough people (and don't ask for a number) share one's phenomenological intuitions, one's project won't be, we hope, insane or unmotivated. In regard to the present bifurcation point, many otherwise sane, rigorous, and careful thinkers in many widely distributed traditions and disciplines have had some version of the intuition that consciousness, somehow, involves a sense of self or sense of it-self.²³

Now, how should we characterize subjective character at the phenomenological level? It does not add much to say that it is a "sense of self." What sort of a sense of self are we talking about? To say that it is "mineness" or "for-meness" makes it seem as though we are talking about the *ownership* of experiences. But this is probably just a certain analogy based on the ownership of property. Yes, for all that matters here, it may well be the case that, always, if I am in a position to know, without having to observe any behavior, that *there is* a pain in the room, then I am in a position to know that it is my *own* pain in the room. But it does not do much good to say that "me-ishness" or "mine-ness" adheres to my experiences like a property or haecceity. It is not as if I just see that my experiences have Willifordhood instead of Zahavihood or Gallagherhood, and thereby know whose are whose—like distinguishing two otherwise qualitatively identical coats by different name tags on the inner pockets.

Note that looking for a special property of the experience is not that different from seeking out its relation to a special object (its owner or The Self) that one may be directly acquainted with. In both cases we are looking for a special something that individuates the experience. There is no interesting difference here between a special unique property that only my experiences have and a special unique self-object to which they all relate.

²³ For just a few examples of the historical pedigree here, see [Caston \(2002\)](#) on Aristotle, [Williams \(2000\)](#) and [Coseru \(2012, ch. 8\)](#) on the Indian and Buddhist debate, [Thiel \(2011\)](#) on the early modern problematic, [Frank \(2004\)](#) on the German Idealist and Romantic discussion, and [Zahavi \(1999 and 2006\)](#) on the Phenomenological movement.

Subjective character should probably not be thought of as a matter of a constant relation to a self-object or as a special property of mine-ness or me-ishness that all experiences come with, all the more is this so if it is possible to misattribute ownership to certain sensations.²⁴ The first-personal dimension (Zahavi), the sense of self in the act of knowing (Damasio), for-meness, me-ishness (Block), ipseity, *être-pour-soi* (Sartre), *Selbstvertrautheit*, and so on—these are all suggestive names for the phenomenon in question. But we'd like to know if there is not an at least somewhat less ambiguous way of characterizing it.

One name for it that I do rather like depends on a grammatical analogy that can be fleshed out a bit more. Every experience, we may say, involves the appearance *of* something *to* something (or someone). The former can be called the *genitive of manifestation* (appearance-of), the latter the *dative of manifestation* (appearance-to).²⁵ The genitive of manifestation corresponds to the intentionality of consciousness—its directedness at objects; the dative of manifestation corresponds to subjective character. The identification of subjective character and the dative of manifestation may not at first be so obvious.

The primary intuition here is that there is no such thing as the mere non-relational phenomenal appearance of an object or quality. Objects and qualities don't just phenomenally manifest—full stop. Rather, anything that phenomenally appears, appears to someone or something (cf. Strawson 2011, pp. 41–46). If this were false, phenomenal consciousness would be more like a monadic property of its objects than like a relation between a subject and an object of some sort (see Butchvarov 1979, p. 250). The idea that consciousness could be phenomenally manifest but manifest *to* no one is

either incoherent or, at best, strains credulity. Yet this seems to be exactly what F and related theorists are committed to—aches and pains that can appear (be phenomenally conscious) but appear to no one.

If we accept that there is a dative of manifestation, that objects and qualities appear *to* someone or something, we are closer to but not quite up to subjective character just yet. Subjective character, recall, is supposed to be something phenomenologically detectable. And one might raise the following sort of worry. Suppose phenomenally manifest objects and properties are manifest *to* something or someone. It does not follow from this alone that that *to which* they are manifest is itself manifest or even manifestable. Nor does it follow that the *fact that* they are manifest to something is manifest or even manifestable. In other words, there could indeed be a dative of manifestation and yet no direct phenomenological evidence of this at all. In fact, Hume's famous failure to find his own self and Moore's similar but more tentative musings on this issue can be taken as expressions of the intuition that we do not find a distinct subject relatum in experience.²⁶ And surely it is true that we do not find a little ubiquitous homunculus—the constant and ever-present thing Hume might have been seeking, like the little face at the bottom of old first-person video games like Quake—to which all our experiences relate—nor do we find a self-haecceity forever re-instantiated by our conscious episodes.

There is, however, this strong intuition that phenomenal consciousness is relational, that it involves a subject-object polarity. And the strong intuition that we do not find any entity or special criterial property that could be a self-entity, me-haecceity, me-ish quale, or subject-relatum is in some apparent tension with this intuition of relationality. Moreover, a *hidden* subject-relatum would not account for the phenomenology of subjective character, evidently. There is a real question here. How is it that consciousness seems to have a subject-object relational structure, and yet we do not

²⁴ See e.g., Lane & Liang (2011). (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this nice article out to me.) If, as I shall argue, subjective character is not fundamentally a representational matter at all, the issue of *representational immunity* to error through misidentification is orthogonal. To the extent that the attribution of ownership is a representational matter, it may or may not be possible to misattribute ownership, as far as the view defended here is concerned.

²⁵ The terminology apparently derives from Prufer (1975) and is very common in phenomenological quarters. See e.g., Zahavi (1999); Crowell (2011, p. 16).

²⁶ See Moore (1910); Butchvarov (1979, p. 250, 1998, p. 55), and Williford (2004). On Hume in this regard, see Strawson (2011).

seem to be able to find the subject-relatum, one of the relata of the relation? Isn't it the case that if something non-inferentially seems relational, then we are non-inferentially aware of its (at least) apparent relata? Speaking naïvely and barring certain irrelevant counterexamples, if I see that the cup is on the table, don't I see the cup and see the table too? In the case of the subject-object polarity, do we imagine or project this relation? Is it a product of reflection and memory?

It seems to me that the F theorist should say that it is somehow a product of higher cognition that is projected onto normal adult human conscious experience. But if one is really committed to the intuition that subjective character is an essential and hence ubiquitous feature of conscious experience, then one will simply have to abandon self-relatum and self-haecceity accounts as characterizations of the phenomenology (and as explanatory models, for that matter). What we need is an account of how it is that consciousness manifestly and non-inferentially appears to have a relational structure even though one of the relata is, in a certain sense, invisible.

Here the view that consciousness is self-manifesting can save the day. An episode or perhaps stream of consciousness, on this view, appears to itself at every moment while other things appear to it as well. This will require more unpacking, but at present we just want to clarify the putative phenomenological content of the claim as best we can. We leave the notion of *appearing* or of *phenomenally manifesting* undefined. Or, if you prefer, we define it ostensibly by inner ostension and hope that our interlocutors know what we are talking about and have similar conscious minds (cf. Fales 1996, pp. 147–148).

Let's say that phenomenal manifestation is just the appearance to/in consciousness of something. Let's leave it open what that something is (qualities, facts, objects). We all can know what phenomenal manifestation is, in this purely phenomenological sense, if we are conscious and capable of normal reflection, attention, memory, and conceptual cognition. If we have tasted coffee, then the taste of coffee has

been phenomenally manifest to us. If we haven't, then it has not. And think of this generically—it's what experiencing the taste of coffee has in common with seeing the blue sky and with feeling one's own existence.²⁷ Now, the claim is that an episode of consciousness is phenomenally manifest to itself whenever anything else is phenomenally manifest to/in that episode. Whenever anything else appears to consciousness, that act or episode or stream of consciousness appears to itself as well. And it is important to remember that this does not mean that one is reflecting on one's experience or that one has any propositional attitude towards that experience or that one is paying any attention to that experience as such.

Now, let us suppose that this is the case. Can we recover a notion of subjective character from this in a way that accounts for both the Humean intuition that the subject-relatum is, in some sense, invisible and that, nevertheless, consciousness has a subject-object relational structure that is phenomenally manifest and non-inferentially knowable? Yes, we can, and at a relatively low price.

The subject-relatum, on the current proposal, is just the episode of consciousness itself. The episode appears to/in the episode. Other things (qualities, objects, etc.) appear in/to the episode as well. The episode is a unified whole, the differentiated qualities and objects appearing in/to it are like its parts (stressing "like"—it's an analogy).²⁸ We do not find episodes that do not have parts (except perhaps in some very special circumstances), but it is foolhardy to look for some special entity or haecceity that is separable from all the other parts or like a part among the parts. There is no such thing. And that, arguably, is the sort of thing Hume was failing to find. No such subject is given, hence we don't find it. Nonetheless, the true subject-relatum, the episode of consciousness itself, is not invisible. It is manifest.

²⁷ Cf. Moore (1910, p. 57). (This paper of Moore's is not as well known as his "Refutation of Idealism," but it deserves to be.)

²⁸ I will not attempt to offer an account of the (synchronic or diachronic) unity of consciousness in this paper (again, see e.g., Dainton 2000) or of mereological principles governing "parts" of episodes of consciousness and episodes as "wholes." It is enough for my purposes that one recognize that conscious episodes are internally variegated unities of some sort.

The main price to pay here is that we must try to wrap our heads around the idea that an episode of consciousness could be the phenomenological *subject* of consciousness. I say, and say truly, that such and such appears to *me* or that *I* see, feel, hear, or am conscious of such and such. If I am a subject of consciousness and all subjects of consciousness are just so many episodes, then am I just an episode of consciousness?! I've seen the incredulous stares with my own eyes and have been told that the sentence expressing the view that the subject of consciousness is the episode of consciousness has the same status as sentences like, "Pink dreams sleep furiously."

Indeed, this claim seems wildly counterintuitive at first. But once we realize that there is a certain temporal element connoted in our usage of "I," then this can be ameliorated. "I" normally refers not just to the present experience but to a whole history of connected experiences and much else besides. So it would be a mistake to infer from "I've seen the incredulous stares" the claim that "Incredulous stares were seen in/by this current episode of consciousness." Instead, in the spirit of Four Dimensionalism, one should translate thus: There was a past series of conscious episodes suitably connected to each other and to the present one; incredulous stares were seen by/in them for some time; and the episodes are being recalled in/by the present conscious episode, which bears the same relation (transitively conceived), or some suitable analogue thereof, in the case of broken streams, to that sequence of earlier episodes.

Note, however, that fundamentally the use of "I" is anchored in moment-by-moment, self-manifesting conscious experience. Imagine a person with severe anterograde amnesia and retrograde amnesia as well. Such a person might think, from moment to moment, "I am seeing this," "I am feeling that," but beyond a certain perhaps necessary amount of working memory, they may not carry any of that information into their future. We can imagine truly minimal subjects that have only the minimal amount of working memory required for consciousness, supposing that some amount is required. On the view proposed here, such a conscious being's

consciousness would still have subjective character. It would simply fail to be more or less automatically enriched by memory, projection, familiarity with one's body and dispositions, autobiographical idealizations and distortions, etc., that is, by the autobiographical representational grid through which our experience is normally spontaneously filtered. Perhaps such a person could not think "I" in the sense in which we normally think it. They may lack an "autobiographical self" and even "extended consciousness", as Damasio would put it (see [Damasio 1999](#) and [2010](#)). But their experience would be self-manifest and other things ("parts") would be manifest in/to that experience as well.

Still, isn't it a bit too odd to hold that the whole episode is conscious of its "parts"—however we end up construing these? Or that the "parts" are phenomenally manifest to/in the whole they belong to? Doesn't this still seem like a totally bizarre thing to say? We have to remind ourselves that there is no thing in consciousness, no ego entity, no homunculus that these qualities could be manifest *to*. We don't find any such thing; and no *hidden* thing could allow us to account for the phenomenology. However, we agreed (I hope) that consciousness has a relational, subject-object structure and that this structure is itself phenomenally manifest and not inferred.

Another way to put it is to say that there is a kind of contrast present in our experience all the time. Something is before me, and it is not me. Something is present to consciousness, but it is not that consciousness. Given our mereological analogy, this contrast is a bit *like* that between a whole and its proper parts. The whole is not a proper part. Yet, at a suitably generic level, it bears the same relation to itself that it bears to its constituents (everything is a part of itself too, though an improper part).

Assuming that this relational structure is not projected onto the experience in reflection, assuming that is, that this is a genuine "prepredicative" structure of experience, the contrast between the subject-pole and the object-pole is manifest, even if it normally remains unthematized or attended to as such. On the hypothesis that consciousness is always self-manifesting,

there is no problem here. The relevant contrast is *like* the contrast between the parts and their unified whole. The parts are manifest. The whole is manifest (self-manifest). So all the needed elements are present for their relations (of differentiation, unification, and inclusion) to be manifest.

Moreover, the idea that the difference between the parts and the whole is prepredicatively manifest is no more implausible than the idea that the difference between parts and other parts is prepredicatively manifest, something almost no one would deny. If I see a red patch on a black background, I have a differentiated, contrastive visual experience. The same goes for differences between the sensory modalities: we see and hear simultaneously, etc. If those sorts of contrasts can figure into the ground level of experience, why not the contrast between the unified self-manifesting whole and all its manifest “parts”—the totality of simultaneously manifesting qualities (however we understand them exactly) in all modalities (sensory and possibly cognitive, conative, and affective)?

Subjective character then, on this view, is just the self-manifesting character of an episode of consciousness. This view has the nice feature that it allows us to simultaneously account for the Humean-Buddhist “no-substantial-self” intuition and the intuition of relationality, with its attendant minimalist “sense of self”—as subject-pole.²⁹ It does this with less metaphysical cost than self-entity and self-haecceity theories, even supposing that those theories are not entirely phenomenologically implausible and explanatorily bankrupt. Let’s remember, however, that this is meant as a phenomenological claim fundamentally: consciousness is self-manifest just as the unified totality of sensory qualities (etc.) is manifest; and their contrast is manifest too, just as the contrast between such qualities (etc.) is manifest. This phenomenological claim has an ontological significance only if we accept that consciousness is indeed how it seems to be upon reflection. A claim that I accept in this case, but one need not accept it to appreciate

the phenomenological point and the virtues of this way of articulating it.

4 From self-representation to self-acquaintance

I gave up on reductive self-representationalism for quite general reasons, reasons affecting all representationalisms. As such, one might be tempted to suggest adopting some non-reductive form of S theory. For example, if one adopts the phenomenal intentionality³⁰ view, one might hold that whatever phenomenal representation *is*, consciousness represents itself in *that* way. It seems like this view might be just another way of describing the same phenomenological facts belabored in the previous section. If that is so, the phrases “phenomenal intentionality” and “acquaintance” are going to be basically synonymous, and the advocate of the former terminology can just translate. If we build nothing into the notion of representation other than the idea that something (an object, property, episode of consciousness, or whatever) is phenomenally manifest (to someone), then the views are indistinguishable at the phenomenological level and, maybe, the ontological level as well.

If this is not what is intended, however, then it is probably because the phenomenal intentionality theorist wants to mark an important distinction between intentionality (representation) and acquaintance. Perhaps they would prefer not to be committed to acquaintance if possible, and there are several reasons they might want to avoid such a commitment. But I will argue that in a certain sense, to be plausible at all, all forms of representationalism, reductive and non-reductive (including a phenomenal intentionality-based representationalism), ought to embrace a type of acquaintance relation.

Consider, for a moment, fictionalist representationalism about sensory qualities (projectionism about colors, for example). One could embrace a view according to which the sensory qualities are phenomenally manifest, though they in fact are never really instantiated by

²⁹ I defend this view also in Williford (2011a, 2011b) and in Williford et al. (2012); Dreyfus (2011) is an articulation and defense of a similar view from a Buddhist perspective.

³⁰ See e.g., Kriegel (2011) and the papers in Kriegel (ed.) (2013), as well as Kriegel’s excellent introduction to that volume.

anything. In such a case, one would not want to think of sensory phenomenal consciousness as a matter of bearing a real acquaintance relation to such qualities or quality instances. Instead one might prefer an adverbial construal of the situation that avoids any commitment to anything literally having (or perhaps even to there being) the properties phenomenally represented. On this view, one denies that there is a relation that supports existential quantification over these immediate objects (whatever they are), and one cannot conclude from the fact that one is phenomenally conscious of a red patch that there exists a red patch of which one is conscious.

Of course, this failure of existential quantification won't apply in the case of one sort of object, namely the conscious episode itself. But it will not be *because* it is an object of phenomenal intentionality that one can validly, existentially generalize from it; generally that fails, just as in other intentional (and intensional) contexts. Rather, it will be because it is the subject or *bearer* of phenomenal intentionality that one can validly generalize from it. In other words, we take episodes of consciousness to be individuals that have this pseudo-relational property. That is why we can quantify over them, and not because of anything that they pseudo-bear that pseudo-relation to. Such “objects,” after all, can be nonexistent. Thomas Reid’s “ambulo ergo sum” would be appropriate here, not the Cartesian *Cogito* conceived in a phenomenologically performative way.

This situation is rather paradoxical. If the only mode of awareness of our own consciousness (even supposing ubiquitous self-manifestation) is via phenomenal intentionality so construed, then our evidence for the very existence of our own consciousness is really no better than our evidence for the existence of phenomenal colors. Just as we might be persuaded that there really are no phenomenal colors, perhaps we could become persuaded that there is no such thing as phenomenal consciousness either. I regard this as absurd. It is like saying that perhaps we only think we think, or that perhaps it only appears to us that things appear to us. Consequently, consciousness must bear some evidentially relevant relation to itself and to its own being, other than the phenomenal

intentionality pseudo-relation it pseudo-bears to phenomenal colors.

Thinking of consciousness as “being-appeared-to-existingly” does not help here, since that applies to phenomenal colors and all other perceived pseudo-objects and pseudo-qualities as well. Any theorist committed to self-manifestation should not try to construe this as just a case of phenomenal intentionality as just described. From our self-consciousness we can conclude that we do exist, and this is not just because we know by inference or in some other way that we are the bearer of a property, as in Reid’s *Ambulo*. We must be acquainted with our own existence—in the sense that every episode of consciousness, however individuated, is acquainted with its own existence. This applies to the subject-pole. What about the object-pole?

In the context of the theory of perceptual consciousness, I think it is a mistake to maintain that any view according to which one can always legitimately quantify over the “immediate objects of conscious awareness” is committed either to some form of direct realism (or perhaps a disjunctivist version thereof) or to old-fashioned sense-datum theory. Any plausible form of representationalism—fictionalist or realist, externalist or internalist, reductive or non-reductive, is, I’ll argue, committed to such quantification, though this must be understood in a particular way. I am not, of course, saying that if we seem to consciously visually perceive a pink rat then we can infer that there exists a pink rat that we see. There is, however, something other than just the conscious state itself (*qua* whole) that we can legitimately, existentially quantify over.

Our conscious perception of differentiation (in unity) entails, even on a representationalist view, that there exists something of which we are aware, namely, at the least, differentiation (or contrast) itself. For example, suppose I hallucinate purple and pinkish smoke clouds arising from stereo speakers as “Fairies Wear Boots” comes on. Evidently I cannot conclude that those purple and pinkish clouds exist. Still, I maintain, we can conclude that there exists some differentiation or contrast of which we are aware. By hypothesis, we cannot say that the difference is that between the pink smoke cloud and the purple one, since they

do not exist. Differences between non-existent objects cannot be appealed to in order to make sense of real differences.³¹ But we are aware of some *real* and phenomenally manifest differentiation here. If we say no to that, we'd have to assume that reflection is simply inaccurate when it comes to such hallucinations; that we seem to have a differentiated experience when in fact there is no phenomenal difference at all. But if that itself is a phenomenal state, say a conscious reflection on an ongoing hallucination, we have the same problem all over again.

If the difference we are aware of is not and is not to be accounted for by a difference in the objects (since they do not exist), it must be a matter of the difference in the representations. Hence, albeit in an indirect manner and, as it were, under the guise of a difference in the pink and purple clouds, we must be aware of some differentiation inherent in the representational states themselves.³² If we reject disjunctivisms, then we ought to maintain that in every case of differentiated phenomenal awareness we are, in fact, acquainted with (and not merely representing) the differences inherent in our episodes of phenomenal consciousness. This is, at any rate, what I think is the most plausible account, even if the considerations just given don't absolutely clinch it. Again, it is not that there cannot be some sort of representationalist response.³³ It is, rather, that I regard the line I take to involve fewer epicycles.

We cannot make good sense of the appearance of a phenomenal difference without direct awareness of differentiation. But, by hypothesis,

³¹ We could possibly hold that even if the property instances are not real, the universals represented are, and try to account for the difference in phenomenology in terms of those real differences. But this sort of view does not allow us to make sense of the concrete but hallucinatory representation of different particular instances of the different properties.

³² I have briefly made similar arguments in Williford (2013).

³³ In particular, a representationalist could say that the represented difference between the pink and purple clouds is just as hallucinatory as the clouds themselves. This is, in a sense, correct. However, representationalists hold (or ought to hold, anyway) that phenomenal differences *always* correlate with differences in the representations themselves (and only normally in the objects of representation). If there are phenomenal differences, there exist some differences inherent in consciousness that are not merely the objects of representation. What I am claiming is that we are acquainted with this differentiation under the guise of differences in objects represented. An adherent of the Transparency Intuition would deny this, of course. And I don't take these considerations to constitute a knock-down argument. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this up.)

in the case of hallucination it cannot be that we are aware of a real difference in the objects of representation. Moreover, it cannot be a difference in something that is *hidden* from conscious awareness—some difference in the externalist conditions determining the content of the representational states, for example—that we are aware of. The most plausible candidate, then, is that we are directly aware of (acquainted with) differentiation or modifications in consciousness itself (and hence the Transparency Intuition (see page 4) is, strictly speaking, false; we are indeed aware of features of consciousness itself even in so-called “first-order” awareness). This applies to both reductive and non-reductive forms of representationalism. If this line of thought is correct, representationalist theories really presuppose some sort of non-representationalist, acquaintance theory.

Implicit in the above discussion is something like this definition of acquaintance:

Acquaintance =_{Df} (1) the relation (R) the subject (s) of consciousness (i.e., the episode or stream itself) bears to the differentiated phenomenal manifold ($D\langle x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n \rangle$), such that (2) if $sR[D\langle x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n \rangle]$, then we may infer truly that $(\exists x)(sRx)$.

Of course, clause (2) can be taken as redundant, given the usual understanding of real relations and that the R of clause (1) is so taken. But in this context it is important to emphasize the point. The first clause is just an inner-ostensive phenomenological characterization that assumes that the relational appearances are indeed the reality; the second is a logico-ontological characterization. Importantly, we can “quantify in” here: If, in any concrete particular case, we stand in that relation to some phenomenally differentiated field, then we can truly infer that *there exists* something differentiated we stand in that relation to. However, it is in general *not* the represented (or intentional) objects that we are thus acquainted with. It is, rather, the common factor of all episodes of phenomenal consciousness, be they hallucinations, dreams, or the “perceptions” of brains in vats. This, again, is often precisely what is denied when one says

that a state is one of representation as opposed to acquaintance. If it is true that *I represent A*, I cannot infer from this that *there is some X such that I represent X*. Adverbialisms and other forms of representationalism were, recall, developed precisely around this insight in order to overcome the problems of sense-datum and other relational theories of perception. Is the theory I am suggesting here a form of old-fashioned sense-datum theory?

Unfortunately I cannot give a short answer to that question and can't give all of the long answer here. This will have to suffice: (1) We can regard sensory qualia (or hyle) as being complex, relational properties of consciousness (and its concrete embodiment in brain processes); in fact, they could be something like irresolvable structural properties that appear simple precisely because they mark a limit of our sensory resolution. (2) In order to flesh this out, we must reject the Revelation Thesis—the thesis that acquaintance yields up all of the properties of sensory qualia. In particular, we can (and should) reject the idea that acquaintance tells us all of the categorial properties of sensory qualities. There is no good reason to believe that it does. Hence, they could fail to seem relational and yet still be relational. This is a solution to the “Grain Problem”—a problem arising from the fact that brain properties are “complex” and relational while sensory qualities (phenomenal colors, tones) do not seem to be. If we infer from the appearances then we cannot consistently hold that they are identical to brain properties. But we have no good reason for making that inference.³⁴ (3) It is not hard to understand why the sensory qualities would be integrated into a spatialized and “intentionally animated” grid that can serve as a “user interface” for us to deal with the external world, yielding a “transparent” manifold in Metzinger’s sense, a manifold we are built to systematically and automatically “see right through”—causing us to suffer from a sort of delusion of direct realism (see Williford et al. 2012; Williford 2013; Metzinger 2004, p. 163, and Revonsuo

2006). Finally, (4) appeals to the “Transparency Intuition” (in Tye’s sense of “transparency”) thus carry no serious weight. All the phenomenological data in question are accounted for by 1–3, and there are good independent lines of reasoning for each of these (that we do not have time to go into here).

I’ve argued that the notion of acquaintance, when interpreted in the rather minimal, phenomenological, and logico-ontological way proposed, is the proper notion for characterizing the relationship between consciousness and the differentiated but unified multimodal experiential manifold. Moreover, on the view proposed here, consciousness bears this same relation, generically understood, to itself.

If the episode of consciousness bears the relation to itself, then evidently there is something to which it bears that relation. But, non-trivially, we could not have the sort of direct evidence of its existence that we do have if consciousness were not self-acquainted—and acquainted with its own existence. And if the episode of consciousness bears the relation to the differentiated manifold that constitutes the surface that serves as its contact with a differentiated reality beyond it—i.e., if it bears it to a differentiated portion of itself—then there is something differentiated of which it is non-representationally aware. One is directly aware of the *difference* or *differentiation* even if one only, strictly speaking, *represents* what the things so differentiated happen to be or interprets them as being such and such (mental, physical, surfaces of objects, internal sense data, quotidian objects, etc.). In other words, I can see that red is not blue even if I do not know what colors are exactly, or if they are in physical space or only in a virtual space in my brain. One does not *merely* represent this difference or differentiation. One is acquainted with oneself and with the differentiation one contains. Of course, one is also acquainted with the apparently intrinsic properties that mark these internal differences, but again, this need not mean that the properties are in fact non-relational and simple. In fine, we are self-acquainted and acquainted with a differentiated manifold and thus, at some level, with real differences in the mind, the

³⁴ I’ve argued this is in a bit more detail in Williford (2013). For relevant background ideas see Williford (2005 and 2007). For a discussion of the Revelation Thesis see e.g., Stoljar (2006, ch. 11) and Goff (forthcoming).

world, or world-mind boundary.³⁵ The acquaintance relation consciousness bears to itself is, generically speaking, identical to the relation it bears to sensory qualia (or hyle)—which are taken here as ultimately just transient modifications in the unfolding embodiment of consciousness. It is important to understand that this does not imply that there is a special type of sensory quality (a “me-ish” quale) peculiar to consciousness. It is as diaphanous as G.E. Moore said. Remember that the acquaintance in an instance of acquaintance with phenomenal red is identical with the acquaintance in an instance of acquaintance with phenomenal C#, even though phenomenal red and C# are utterly heterogeneous.

One might reasonably ask for a more substantive definition or account of acquaintance. The definition given relies on phenomenology and logic and is otherwise quite empty. But this is as it should be, in my view. Any further account of the nature of acquaintance, of what the acquaintance relation *is*, will be the result of empirical inquiry and a well-supported *a posteriori* identification.

5 Self-acquaintance, subjective character, and individuation

Earlier I briefly noted that at the phenomenological level we should probably not construe subjective character fundamentally as a matter of “mineness” or a “sense of self” where the latter is thought of as a sense of oneself as an owner of experiences. It is not that I do not think this description contains a grain of truth; I do. The worry, though, is that if we go this route, we might come to the conclusion that subjective character involves acquaintance with a haecceity—Zahavihood and Gallagherhood once again. Here I want to consider the same issue from a more ontologically oriented point of view.

We are indeed individuated and aware of ourselves (something individuated). And we can be aware of ourselves *as* distinct individuals and owners. But this does not at all entail the doctrine of haecceities immediately present to con-

sciousness—for-me-ness or me-ishness as a special property that no one else can share. Rather, subjective character is a common form that all conscious states have; but having this form does not alone make something the individual it is, evidently. It may be that in virtue of which we can be *aware* of ourselves as individuals, but it is not that in virtue of which we *are* the individuals we are. Yes, there is a determinate individual (somehow construed) that is acquainted with itself. No, this does not necessarily mean that it is acquainted with that *in virtue of which* it is individuated. That could be whatever it is that individuates physical objects. Or, perhaps, nothing is metaphysically individuated *by* anything else. But it ought to be clear that simply in being aware of myself I need not be privy to anything non-trivial about my metaphysical individuation conditions.³⁶

You are aware of your consciousness as something individual. You are a self-aware individual, if you prefer. But this does not mean that your subjectivity consists in being directly aware of *what* individuates you or the very property in virtue of which you are the individual you are. Or, perhaps, one may be aware of this property or set of properties, but only in the guise of being an individual that is thus and so. The “thus and so” part (all your contingent properties, your “facticity”) is radically changeable. You need not have been thus and so. (You could have been a contender! And if only you’d been rich!) You can also be aware that you are a particular instance. So, yes, you can become aware of your particularity. But everybody is aware of their own particularity. And it is, in a way, an empty and non-material (in the “formal vs. material” sense) property. It’s not as if my particularity has a special something that yours lacks and vice versa. Hence, I would not be able to tell, by phenomenological intuition alone (or in any other way for that matter), which of the infinitely many duplicate and near-duplicate worlds I am in (cf. Elga 2004). Am I in the world in which one of Napoleon’s buttons had a bit of his blood on them the morning of the Battle of Jena or in the world in which that was

³⁵ I have considered our acquaintance with a differentiated manifold *qua* mind-world boundary in more detail in Williford (2013).

³⁶ I have briefly argued this before in Williford (2011b). I was pleased to find that a similar line of argument was pursued by the eleventh-century Buddhist philosopher Ratnakīrti; see Ganeri (2012, p. 217).

not the case? I cannot tell by introspection, yet, depending on the correct answer, I am one type of individual (and of course, one token of uncountably many of that type) and not of the other type (which type also contains uncountably many individual counterparts of mine). I am individuated, and I know that; I belong to just one of these worlds. But I do not have complete access to my individuation conditions or the conditions, if there are any, that determine that this individual is in one world as opposed to another. I have uncountably many counterparts who feel exactly the same way because, to speak loosely, they don't know that they are not me; none of us can tell the difference. I cannot locate my Homeworld on the map of worlds that contains my relevant counterparts.

It is a mistake, then, to make subjective character depend on the sense of individuality; this reverses the proper order of explanation. Self-acquaintance and concrete instantiation yield the sense of individuality, and they do it again and again in many places and in the same way. Evidently, the contingent filling that experience and history infuse into the formal shell of conscious subjectivity is not relevant at the level we are concerned with. Hence, it can also be metaphysically, not just phenomenologically, misleading to use terms like “for-me-ness,” “mineness,” “me-ishness,” etc. That is to make something derived seem like something basic. The basic things are self-acquaintance (“reflexivity”) and actual, concrete instantiation or constitution. The sense of individuality comes from these, not the other way around.

Of course, if you are a real, concrete individual, you are individuated. But individuation is evidently not self-acquaintance. The latter is, however, required if one is to get the *sense* of being an individual, to know, feel, and be concerned with oneself *as* an individual. If we generally equated self-acquaintance with something's being the individual it is, then we'd have to hold either that every individuated thing in the cosmos is self-acquainted and conscious, or that conscious things have one type of metaphysical individuation conditions, and non-conscious things another, for very obscure reasons. Moreover, we either must not take subjective character to be a

univocal notion or must resort to some sort of hopeful brute resemblance nominalism about subjective character and maintain that we cannot not really know that, say, I, *qua* subject, am in any meaningful sense like you, *qua* subject. This is not a very good dilemma to be in.³⁷ I think the more plausible view is that self-acquaintance is not the source of the individuation of consciousness but rather something that both concretely depends upon individuation and enables the knowledge of individuality and, consequently, self-location in surrounding spaces.

It is misleading, then, both phenomenologically and ontologically to refer to subjective character principally as “mineness” or “me-ishness” or “for-me-ness,” even though subjective character is one of the bases of the sense of individuality. We should not think of self-acquaintance (and subjective character) as anything more than this relation all episodes of consciousness bear to themselves. It is a perfectly uniform structure and a kind of universal—in that sense, supposing one is some sort of realist about universals, there is indeed some identical thing that unifies all episodes (or subjects) of consciousness, namely the very property of being self-manifesting; but we are all distinct instances. Thus, in a very special and non-Vedantist sense, we could say that there are many instances of consciousness but only one subject, with some instances connected to each other and grouped together in other important ways as well. But there is no substantial self. In this regard, I am with Hume, Sartre, Parfit, Strawson, Metzinger, the Buddhists, and other “non-egological” theorists of consciousness. Note that this does not mean that consciousness is “anonymous” in the sense of “subjectless.” Every stream of consciousness has its transient subject (*viz.*, itself) but that is not a substantial self.

6 Self-acquaintance, intrinsic properties, and physicalism

Should we really regard self-acquaintance as a relational matter? Is it really a matter of some

³⁷ Previous episodes of consciousness normally connected to the present episodes (the ones producing this document) found themselves trying to live with the latter horn of the dilemma in the flawed Williford (2005).

sort of thing standing in a relation to itself? On the one hand, there is no special problem either logically or phenomenologically speaking with the idea of something relating to itself in this way. Appearance is appearance-to. That's relational. There is no *a priori* reason why something could not appear to itself. It does not lead to a regress.³⁸ One should put aside misleading and question-begging spatial analogies—consciousness is not like a knife trying to cut itself. Advocates of self-acquaintance will claim, opposing one analogy with another, that it is more like a candle's flame illuminating itself by emission while it illuminates other things by the reflection of its light; it does not require another candle flame for it to be illumined.³⁹ Moreover, one must remember to exclude from one's mind the sort of objectification and description-based cognition that normally overlays the phenomenal manifold. We are talking about the sphere of immanence, to speak Husserlian, and not about intentional objects or constituted objectivities given via *Abschattungen*. Again, we are talking about immediate self-acquaintance, not the representation of oneself as being such and such. It is indeed more like the emission of light than the reflection of light, if we must pick an analogy.

Nevertheless, even if we accept the relational construal and remember that it is an immediate and direct relation not mediated by concepts or descriptions, we still have a problem. It is not as if conscious episodes just happen to be self-manifesting. The property of being self-manifesting is not something that a thing can have and then not have—like changing coats of paint. It is of the very essence of a conscious episode. This is not an external relation to itself or one mediated by convention or history or anything else. Hence, it must have some set of intrinsic properties in virtue of which it is self-manifesting. Thus, the Heidelberg School, Michel Henry, and Dan Zahavi, I'll

concede, win on this ontological point. Dieter Henrich, Manfred Frank, Henry, and Zahavi have all maintained that self-manifestation could not be a relational matter (e.g., [Henrich 1971, 1982](#); [Frank 2002, 2007](#); [Zahavi 1999](#); [Henry 1973](#)). And they are very close to being right. I think, however, that it is more accurate to say that even if it is a relational matter, it is not an *external* relation we are dealing with. So there must be something about the internal structure of consciousness that grounds the relation. In short, as Henrich and Frank have long said, there must be some intrinsic property in virtue of which episodes of consciousness (out of all other things in the world) are self-manifesting. What could this property be? Are we left with something that cannot be physical, or, even if it is physical, is nevertheless irreducible in some sense?

It may seem now that David Rosenthal is having his revenge.⁴⁰ In effect, I have been arguing against the extrinsicalist view—the view that something's being conscious has to do with external relations the thing stands in—be those external relations to other mental states or external relations to historically distant states of affairs or to other parts of one's cognitive apparatus. Now, to our chagrin, it seems we are left with something explanatorily basic. At this point we are left with two problematic strategies. We could go the panpsychist route ([Strawson 2006](#)): It's no surprise that we're conscious if everything is! Or if, as I do, one thinks (after Locke in a similar context) that “every sleepy nod doth refute” this, we can hold that only certain physical complexes instantiate this particular property (or set of properties). This will mean either some form of property dualism or some form of identity theory (possibly with its “Harder Problem”; see [Block 2002](#)). If one does not want to be a dualist or a panpsychist, what can be said?

Here is the sort of approach that seems most attractive (to me, anyway). We want to hold that consciousness is indeed some sort of physical process. It's not, however, just a matter of the satisfaction of some functional role. I

³⁸ This is demonstrable. First, obviously, there is no logical problem with reflexive relations. Second, it requires special and highly questionable premises to generate another regress here. See [Williford \(2006\)](#). See also [Kriegel \(2009, p. 124\)](#) and [Janzen \(2008, p. 110\)](#).

³⁹ The knife blade and candle flame competing analogies loom large in the Indo-Tibetan debate on this issue. Clearly, the analogies will be found, by opponents and proponents, to be exactly as plausible as the views they encode.

⁴⁰ Though even Rosenthal's own view was pushed into being (or always was) problematic in this regard, as noted above.

think it also has a functional role. But it is not *in virtue of* playing that role that something is consciousness; rather, consciousness is suitable for that role because of its properties.⁴¹ In principle, many different things could play that role (at least if we specify it entirely in behavioral terms). Or, at least, this is an open question. Consciousness has a functional role, but it is not to be identified with just any arrangement of elements that can play that role as causally and behaviorally specified. There is some special, distinctive physical process that is consciousness. It plays its functional role in virtue of its having the properties it does and *not vice versa*. But then does some version of Russellian Monism start to seem attractive (see e.g., [Stoljar 2006](#), ch. 6 and [Pereboom 2011](#), chs. 5 and 6)? Am I saying that the functional role is just being (contingently) satisfied by a (somehow) unified and self-manifesting group of qualia? Or something *wild* like that?

Here we play the same sort of trick we played when dealing with the Grain Problem. Consciousness is self-acquainted, but we are also, as Fumerton and Fales would say, acquainted with acquaintance; we are given givenness ([Fumerton 1985](#), pp. 57–58 and [Fales 1996](#), pp. 147–148). The relation does not seem complex or to involve many layers of relational structures. But we cannot infer from this appearance that it is in fact such a simple relation. Again, its not seeming complex does not, without controversial and implausible completeness assumptions, entail its being simple. Moreover, once we realize that normal consciousness involves a great many intricately related aspects—at least (non-contingently) differentiated unity and temporality, and (contingently) animation functions operating on a differentiated sensory manifold, iterations of these functions, pattern extractions, etc.—we have all the more reason to suppose that there is complicated machinery hidden from our introspective view. In fact, it will be noted in a Sartrean and Moorean vein, that consciousness, both as acquaintance relation and subject-relatum, seems mightily empty. Once we realize that Revelation theses fail, then we no longer need read this ap-

pearance as “consciousness *qua* acquaintance relation appears simple.” Rather, we read it as “consciousness *qua* acquaintance relation *does not appear* complex.” These are, in many cases, phenomenologically indistinguishable, but they are logically different.⁴² The first reading, coupled with an infallibility thesis (or with just a strong presumption in favor of the deliverances of naïve introspection), leads to the view that acquaintance is simple. But the other requires a Revelation (or completeness) thesis to get the same result. Revelation is, again, totally implausible. And even if we were to assume infallibility, we have no a priori reason to favor one interpretation of the phenomenological data over the other—the “seeming non-P” vs. “not seeming P” formulation. We do, however, have plenty of *a posteriori* inductive reasons for preferring the latter: It does not seem complex, but it is (or at least could be for all we can tell phenomenologically).

Since we have an extremely limited resolution when it comes to penetrating into the nature of consciousness by introspective means, we are quite free to adopt another strategy. We can accept an *a posteriori* identity theory. Consciousness is identical to some sort of recurrent physical process unfolding in the brain. Fundamentally, what we get from introspection is a sort of structure and some irresolvables—the sensory qualities—that are like reflections of the materials in which the form or structure is instantiated. Since we have rejected Revelation (completeness) theses, we can accept that sensory qualities (and the acquaintance relation itself) are complex and involve layers of relations even though they do not seem this way (just as the headless woman⁴³ in the famous illusion does not seem to have a head—absence of appearance is transformed into the appearance of an absence; see [Armstrong 1968](#) and [1973](#)).

⁴² They are phenomenologically indistinguishable in the way that the stream of consciousness’s being temporally continuous is, plausibly, phenomenologically indistinguishable from consciousness’s being punctate or discrete, or in the way in which consciousness’s seeming free from causal determination is phenomenologically indistinguishable from its simply not seeming determined (because the causal relations are inaccessible, as Spinoza suggested).

⁴³ See the following links:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXOqD5B5Sxc>
<http://www.deceptology.com/2010/10/headless-woman-illusion.html>

⁴¹ Here I am in considerable agreement with [Langsam \(2011, ch. 3\)](#).

We can use what structure we are aware of, however, to build models to guide our search for the neural correlates of consciousness. One thing we see is that the (only apparently simple) acquaintance relation involved is such that whenever xRy , xRx ; while it is not the case that if xRy , then yRy (in the case where y is a sensory quality or manifold thereof). And we have some idea of what the qualities in the manifold could be—e.g., limits of resolution or irresolvables operated on by a spatializing filter. We can also see that spatial projection, integration of multimodal information, temporality, and the modulation of attention are involved (along, of course, with more advanced things like intentional animation, cognitive filtering and reprocessing, and poise for action). We have a self-manifesting totality containing a unified and spatialized but differentiated manifold. Consequently, we do need to look for processes that can do information integration and binding, but that is only necessary, not sufficient. We need to look as well at processes that spatialize the multimodal (and multidimensional) information (see [Williford et al. 2012](#)).

This does not at all mean we are looking for a little room in the brain that has patches of red, yellow, blue, and green mental paint in it. Rather we must look for more abstract correspondences. In the case of the sensory qualities, we are possibly looking for higher-order relations between fairly complex structures, structures that can transiently be pulled into and “rendered” by the core process. Basically, this panoply of contrast-related irresolvables gets generated in a real-time and transient fashion, now occupying this virtual “location”, now occupying that, depending on a whole host of input factors (head orientation, background, conceptualization, etc.). These “locations” map onto (we hope) real physical space at a certain scale, but it is not a matter of finding a “bubble within a bubble.” It is a matter of an abstract correlation of structure. The isomorphisms (or homomorphisms) could be there even if the internal “space” of experience is entirely virtual, a kind of computational “movie in the brain” to use another phrase of Damasio’s. Assuming the principle that the positive and critically evalu-

ated set of phenomenological descriptions gives us not just the way consciousness seems, but the way it in fact is, along with our identity postulate, we can be sure that something in the brain has a structure corresponding to this, no matter how transformed by “layers of abstraction” it may be.

What is more, self-acquaintance will demand that we explore models in which real reflexivity can be encoded. Hofstadter’s model is one of these.⁴⁴ But following D. Rudrauf and further encouraged by D. Bennequin, I have moved in the direction of considering projective geometrical models. There is no space to go into this here, but suffice it to say that there exist mathematical frameworks that allow us to conceptualize and investigate more deeply the self-acquaintance-related features of consciousness by considering the interplay of the space we project and the origin of the projection (see [Williford et al. 2012](#) and [Rudrauf et al. ms](#)).

The goal of such work would be the refinement of mathematical models of the structure of consciousness. Upon the achievement of that end, we would then try to determine how such models could possibly be physically realized in the brain. Once we can say what the physically detectable signatures of such a realization might be, then we could one day meaningfully test such theories. Were we to verify the existence of such a structured process in the brain, explaining consciousness would reduce to explaining how the process is realized—what parts have to be in what order doing what and at what time scale.

It will always seem to be a brute fact, at some level, that consciousness is physical process X , however X gets fleshed out. But we’ll just get used to it, as long as there is some somewhat intelligible bridge (in this case provided by mathematical models) from the lived phenomenon to its brain correlate. We’ll get used to it just as we’ve gotten used to water being H_2O . It could be that there will be multiple ways to implement such a process. Sup-

⁴⁴ While Hofstadter’s Gödel-inspired model might be problematic (both in terms of physical implementation and in terms of the strong mathematical realism it might presuppose), it is certainly in the right class of models we should be considering. See [Hofstadter \(2007\)](#).

pose, just for example, that it has to do with generating certain types of fields and that multiple substrates, not just brains, can generate and support the relevant sorts of fields. Then consciousness will be, to that degree, multiply realizable. Suppose it is a matter of realizing a certain computational organization. Then, in effect, implementing a certain program will be equivalent to being conscious; and if machines made from different substrates or with different architectures can run the program, consciousness will be multiply realizable in the sense of computational functionalism. Your particular consciousness then, as you know and love it, would be just the concrete running of the program in your particular brain.

We might wonder, in such a case, what it is to “run” a program or to “have” a certain structure or to “instantiate” such an arrangement or system of fields or whatever. Of course, this is a quite general metaphysical problem that we should not confuse with any problem specific to consciousness. However, given that we are acquainted with our own individual existence, it seems that somehow its instantiation makes its very instantiation available or manifest in some non-representational way. This is rather peculiar. If we are going to be physicalists who are nonetheless responsible to the phenomenology, however, this is what we have to accept, or so I have argued. Something is conscious if it has a certain internal structure and attendant dynamical profile. Being conscious *is* having that structure and profile. We will never be able to explain *why* that is the case because it is simply a confusion to think that identities like this admit of explanation; they can only be discovered (Papineau 2002, ch. 3). We must, of course, give evidence in favor of the relevant identity claim; uncovering such evidence is the goal of scientific research on consciousness. Our choice is between this sort of view and the view that *there is something else, something non-physical* that just *is* consciousness. Of course, we’d never be able to explain why *that* is the case either. So in the absence of compelling arguments for dualism or panpsychism, Occam’s Razor would lead us, as Smart pointed out so long ago, to embrace an identity theory.

The identity theory only adumbrated here would be neither a crude type-type identity theory nor a causal-role functionalist token-token identity theory where the realizers do not matter at all. Since any concrete consciousness is a marriage of form and matter (and the self-appearance of that marriage), and since there no doubt are physical constraints on what sorts of materials can be put into that form, we want to identify consciousness with neither a specific type of material (or “wonder tissue” in Dennett’s phrase) nor with an abstract, disembodied form that seems trivially realizable by practically any set of elements—since purely abstract isomorphisms may be a dime a dozen.⁴⁵ In other words, we need a non-eliminativist and non-idealist account of what it is to *really* realize a structure, instantiate a form, or, as the case may be, to *really* run a program or compute a function. To my knowledge, no one currently has such an account.

At bottom, this is just the old metaphysical problem of the Methexis—the relation of universals to particulars or of form to matter. When I am feeling optimistic, I imagine that I’ve reduced the problem of consciousness to another, more general (as well as ancient and probably insoluble) metaphysical problem. We may not know what it is for matter to really and mind-independently take on a certain form, but it is hardly an implausible metaphysics that says that this happens. It is arguably this type of metaphysical view that would best explain the success of applied mathematics, engineering, and the sciences: they are successful because the world really does have (or approximate) the relevant mathematical structures—these are *in re* structural universals. This seems to be a commitment of scientific realism. But perhaps we will never get beyond a rather crude operationalism when we empirically investigate such matters; perhaps the metaphysical nature of property instantiation will forever remain obscure to us. That should not, however, discourage us from carrying on such empirical investigations in the case of consciousness. Even if there will be

⁴⁵ For discussion, see Chalmers (1996) and Buechner (2008, ch. 3).

a residual metaphysical mystery, it is a general one, not one specific to consciousness.

The main point here, and the concluding one, is that consciousness could be self-acquainted, where this is not a matter of external relations, and still some form of relatively non-mysterious (hylomorphic) physicalism could be true. One might balk at the idea that this would not be a matter of external relations, especially if we go the computational functionalist route. But think of it like this: If we are realists about the implementation of computational structures, then even though the structures involve parts and elements, there is still a unity to the pattern as implemented. It is, in a certain sense, an indivisible whole that is not just the mereological sum of its parts. Analogously, the circle has its own structure and characteristic properties even though it is made of points. What we really need, and may never have (but who knows?) is a theory that tells us when we have a real, concrete unified whole, (where this is *not* simply a functional or conventional characterization but is a matter of more basic physical relations) and when we have unities and wholes (and instantiations of structures and properties) that are only conventionally real.

Suppose then that we adopt a sort of realism about computational (or otherwise structural) wholes, which we have some independent reason to do. Circles have remarkable properties, *qua* circles, even if they are made up of points. Concrete circular things approximate these. Simultaneous cycles have certain number-theoretic properties just *qua* cycles regardless of *what* they are cycles of (e.g., reproducing cicadas and cicada predators, see [Baker 2005](#)). Likewise, for the concrete implementation of consciousness, it is surely the case that certain elements must be put into a certain arrangement, realizing a certain structure and dynamics. This would not mean, however, that consciousness *as such* is to be identified with either those elements or the arrangement abstractly conceived. Rather it is the *concretely implemented* organization of those elements *qua* whole. In virtue of being an instance of that form or structure, it has

certain properties. One of these could be the property of being self-manifesting. That property could itself be a complex relational property having a certain unity. The account sketched here presupposes a certain realism about the instantiations of mathematical and computational structures—that there are determinate, mind-independent facts of the matter about this. We cannot go further into this rather large and complicated metaphysical hornet’s nest. Suffice it to say that a real, unified, concretely instantiated structure could, in a certain sense, be relational and have components even if it is, in another sense, an intrinsic property.

7 Conclusion

I have argued that the best way to characterize subjective character is in terms of self-acquaintance and not, for various reasons, in terms of Higher-Order, Same-Order, or Privileged-Object representation. I argued that every episode or stream of consciousness is acquainted with itself, and not with a self in some other sense—a homunculus, substance, or haecceity. This is, I maintain, the best way to make sense of the intuition of subject-object polarity and the Humean intuition that we do not find a self-entity. Moreover, one’s sense of being an individual is a consequence of self-acquaintance and concrete existence and not to be conflated with subjective character as such. Such conflation leads to potentially misleading descriptions of subjective character (as “mineness”) and, if taken literally, to metaphysically and epistemologically undesirable consequences. We are individuated and self-acquainted, and that is enough to allow us to derive the sense of self or “mineness”; but self-acquaintance is not itself what individuates us, nor does it necessarily make us aware of what does.

Nevertheless, I conceded to Henrich, Frank, Henry, and Zahavi (among others) that consciousness must have some intrinsic (or internal relational) property in virtue of which it is self-acquainted. But I argued that this does not nullify the appropriateness of de-

scribing subjective character as being a matter of a very complex relation, though it does not seem to be so complex.

Finally, I argued that the position advanced here is not incompatible with a form of (hylomorphic) physicalism. Sensory hyle, the acquaintance relation itself, the self-manifesting episodes, could all be brain processes and properties. On the phenomenological side, this gains plausibility once we take to heart the incompleteness of introspection (and of pre-reflective self-awareness as well): not seeming complex and relational does not entail not being complex and relational. On the ontological side, I argued that even some form of computational functionalism could be true. But, generally, the important thing to remember is that consciousness is the marriage of form and matter. It cannot be simply equated with either. This opens up space for multiple realizability, but it might also mean that not just any old substrate will do. It's an open question. The metaphysical commitment behind this position is just some form of realism about structural universals and their mind-independent instantiation conditions, which is arguably a commitment of scientific realism in any case. Absent dualism, panpsychism, or idealism, that is what we will have to accept, I believe. (Eliminativism is, of course, a non-starter.)

We do not need a theory of the Methexis, however, in order to attempt to find the neural correlates (correlation conceived of as indicating identity here) of consciousness by building mathematical models of the phenomenology and figuring out how the brain might implement the structures so modeled. In fact, just such an approach is quite in line with scientific practice generally: We know that the world we investigate with our relatively crude means is, in multiple ways, a play of matter and form even if we do not really know what the Matter ultimately is, what Forms are, and how the latter come to live in the former.

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