

The Normativity of Introspective Acquaintance Knowledge

Jacopo Pallagrosi

Forthcoming in *Synthese*

Abstract: Recent works in epistemology have defended the existence of acquaintance knowledge—a non-propositional form of knowledge constituted by the subject's acquaintance with particulars. A significant obstacle to the epistemic legitimacy of acquaintance knowledge lies in the fact that acquaintance is a descriptive psychological phenomenon, whereas knowledge is a normative one. In this paper, I aim to address this challenge by arguing that introspective acquaintance knowledge—the subject's knowledge of their own experiences constituted by acquaintance with them—exhibits a normative dimension. My argument critically hinges on the role of conscious introspective attention. Based on the idea that a distinctive manifestation of the presence of epistemic normativity has to do (at least) with the possibility for a piece of knowledge to be epistemically better or worse, I will argue that we can have epistemically better or worse introspective acquaintance knowledge and that this depends on the degree of attention that is involved in it. By assuming that possibly being epistemically better or worse implies that a piece of knowledge possibly instantiates different degrees of epistemic goodness, and that conscious introspective attention comes in degrees, I will argue that conscious attention plays a gradual epistemic role in acquaintance knowledge. The paper aims to strengthen the case for introspective acquaintance knowledge as a genuine form of epistemic achievement, governed by attention-based normative standards.

Keywords: Acquaintance - Introspection - Epistemic normativity - Attention - Epistemic gradability

1. Introduction

In recent years, a new generation of epistemologists and philosophers of mind (Duncan 2020; Atiq 2021; Giustina 2022) has proposed various arguments in favor of the existence of a kind of non-propositional knowledge of particulars that is constituted by the relation of acquaintance that the subject bears to them.¹ The general idea is that the subject's direct awareness of things constitutes a kind of knowledge that is not reducible to any other kind of knowledge. We may

¹ Other philosophers who, although not offering positive arguments, accept the existence of this kind of knowledge are Russell (1910), Conee (1994), McGinn (2008), Tye (2009), Fiocco (2017), Coleman (2019), Pitt (2019), Ranalli (2023), Kriegel (2024), Pallagrosi and Cortesi (2024).

call this *acquaintance knowledge*.² Crucially, acquaintance knowledge is taken to be logically independent of any piece of propositional knowledge the subject might have. The genesis of this idea dates back at least to the work of Bertrand Russell (1910; 1912), who, in his taxonomy of the epistemic realm, called “knowledge by acquaintance” a form of objectual knowledge independent of and more fundamental than knowledge of truths (i.e., propositional knowledge). Despite the intellectual authority of its originator, the existence of acquaintance knowledge failed to garner widespread acceptance, to the extent that it was nearly forgotten by most contemporary epistemologists over the past century. However, in recent years, the notion of acquaintance knowledge has resurged to prominence in the philosophical arena. The reasons for this renewed interest are manifold, in that positing this kind of knowledge has indeed many significant theoretical repercussions in both epistemology and philosophy of mind. To cite just a few examples of the explanatory advantages it is supposed to bring, acquaintance knowledge is thought to be the cornerstone for establishing a foundationalist program in epistemology (Kriegel 2024), it is believed to account for the intrinsic epistemic significance of experience (Duncan 2021), and to explain the intimate and infallible epistemic contact that subjects have at a pre-conceptual level of the introspective process (Giustina 2022). Furthermore, acquaintance knowledge plays notable theoretical roles also in other fields, such as aesthetics (Ranalli 2023) and ethics (Atiq 2021; Atiq and Duncan, forthcoming; Atiq, forthcoming). Thus, there is a growing literature surrounding this arguably controversial but potentially impactful idea. However, for proponents of this ‘acquaintance knowledge renaissance’ to advance their project, they need to address a pressing and yet underexplored issue—or so I argue.

Acquaintance is a descriptive, psychological notion (characterized as a relation of direct awareness), while knowledge is a normative notion. On the one hand, granting the psychological reality and ubiquity of acquaintance, the direct awareness of things is just an invariant feature of our mental makeup *qua* conscious creatures. On the other hand, knowledge is a normative phenomenon in that it involves standards and norms that govern its acquisition and justification. These norms are not just descriptive but prescriptive—they tell us how we *ought* to conduct our epistemic practices and what we *ought* to believe if we want to achieve knowledge. If we assume, say, an analysis of propositional knowledge in terms of justified true belief (plus some Gettier-proof conditions), a true belief must meet certain justificatory standards to qualify as knowledge (e.g., a true belief must be supported by adequate evidence).

The way it has been characterized so far, acquaintance knowledge lacks an analogous normative dimension or, at least, little if any work has been done to spell out acquaintance knowledge’s normativity. I take this discrepancy between the descriptive and normative realms to be one of the main obstacles to seriously considering the idea that acquaintance itself constitutes a kind of knowledge.

To see more clearly where the problem lies, consider that in the domain of belief and propositional knowledge, most epistemic norms are required in light of the possibility of false belief. The possibility of error necessitates some kind of normative dimension, as norms are there

² This is more often called (following Russell) “knowledge by acquaintance,” but, drawing on Pitt (2019), I am opting for the label “acquaintance knowledge” to highlight the fact that what is at issue here is the knowledge that is *constituted* (rather than merely caused, enabled, or justified) by the relation of acquaintance (cf. Giustina 2022 on this distinction).

to guide us towards knowledge and steer us away from error. Conversely, if there were no possibility of forming false beliefs, there would be no need for most of the norms that regulate the acquisition and maintenance of beliefs.³ Successfully adhering to epistemic norms leads one to true beliefs through proper justification. Since compliance with norms leads us to achieve epistemic goals, epistemic normativity might be what explains (at least in part) how knowledge constitutes an *epistemic achievement*. Acquaintance, however, seems to be different from propositional knowledge in this respect. In acquaintance there is no analog of false belief. Acquaintance is typically taken to be factive: when a subject S is acquainted with an item *x*, *x* exists and is presented to S as it is. Further, acquaintance, often taken to automatically guarantee an absolute, faultless epistemic success, constitutes an invariably perfect and complete knowledge of the things we are directly aware of.⁴ This alleged feature of acquaintance knowledge renders it importantly dissimilar and heterogeneous compared to other kinds of knowledge—especially propositional knowledge (Kriegel 2009: 112-13). Even more threateningly, acquaintance knowledge appears to be dissimilar in a respect that seems to be crucially related to what makes propositional knowledge *knowledge* (i.e., a respect that seems to be essential to epistemic significance), namely the possibility of error. Moreover, the absence of norms that govern the way we ought to be aware of things renders assigning an epistemic status to the relation of acquaintance a fairly unwarranted move. In a more incisive formulation, the objection asserts that acquaintance carries a sort of intrinsic epistemic magic that makes it automatically an imperfection-proof epistemic success. The perfect knowledge status would come for free—the objection goes—together with our direct awareness of things. And this is likely to sound like a poorly motivated stipulation. The reasons are thus evident for why acquaintance knowledge theorists must address the challenge and take a stance on the issue of its normativity. The very viability of the view partly hinges on this.

What I aim to do in this paper is precisely to confront this challenge. In particular, I will attempt to provide an argument to cash out this neglected normative dimension of acquaintance knowledge. I will focus on *introspective* acquaintance knowledge—IAK henceforth—that is the knowledge of our phenomenally conscious mental states that is constituted by acquaintance (I explain the reason for this restriction in §2). In the view I propose, the normativity of IAK is tightly connected to *introspective attention*. Based on the idea that a distinctive manifestation of the presence of epistemic normativity has to do (at least) with the possibility for a piece of knowledge

³ Arguably, there are epistemic norms that govern the *quantity* of true beliefs one ought to have, such as a norm like: believe as many truths as possible. *Prima facie*, such norms seem independent from the possibility of error and would be useful in regulating knowledge acquisition even in the absence of the possibility of false beliefs. Similar norms appear to have an analog in the case of acquaintance knowledge - an isomorphic norm might be expressed as “get acquainted with as many things as possible.” Thus, the asymmetry between propositional knowledge and acquaintance knowledge stems from the presence (in the former case) and absence (in the latter case) of a different kind of norms, closely related to the dimension of epistemic risk (such as the risk of error or the risk of holding false beliefs). Finally, it is worth noting that quantitative epistemic norms like ‘believe as many truths as possible’ seem to be in some sense derivative from more basic epistemic norms that are instead connected to the possibility of error - in this case, the truth norm: ‘believe only what is true.’

⁴ Notoriously, this conception of acquaintance knowledge was originally expressed by Russell himself, according to whom when the subject is aware of the red color sense-datum that makes up the appearance of some object, the subject has an imperfectionless acquaintance knowledge of it: “I know the colour red perfectly and completely when I see it, and no further knowledge of it itself is even theoretically possible” (1912: 19). On this view, the epistemic grasp of the particular in question is thus epistemically perfect and complete.

to be epistemically better or worse, I will argue that we can have epistemically better or worse acquaintance knowledge and that this depends on the degree of attention that is involved in it. By assuming that possibly being epistemically better or worse implies for a piece of knowledge to possibly instantiate different *degrees* of epistemic goodness, and that conscious introspective attention comes in degrees, I will argue that conscious attention plays a gradual epistemic role in acquaintance knowledge.

Here is how I will proceed. First, I will introduce some key notions (§2). Then, I will make some preliminary considerations regarding my proposed view of IAK and offer an argument to capture IAK's normativity (§3). The rest of the paper will be devoted to defending each of the argument's premises (§§4-5).

2. Preliminaries

This section is meant to offer a more detailed elucidation of the key notions at play in the paper: namely, introspective acquaintance, conscious attention, and IAK. The sole dialectical purpose of the following subsections is to clarify the technical terms at issue. Besides referring to the relevant literature, I will not offer any argument for the existence of the aforementioned phenomena. Instead, I will proceed under the assumption that acquaintance with our experiences exists and that it constitutes a *sui generis* kind of knowledge of their phenomenal character.

2.1 Introspective Acquaintance

Acquaintance is characterized in terms of the subject's direct awareness of a particular.⁵ When a subject *S* is acquainted with an item *x*, *S* is directly aware of *x*. Acquaintance is commonly framed as an existence-entailing mental phenomenon: being acquainted with *x* entails the existence of *x*. Some authors with naïve realist inclinations (e.g., Brewer 2004; Martin 2002 among many others) argue that we can be *perceptually* acquainted with objects and properties in the external world.⁶ Here, I focus on *introspective* acquaintance, a type of *inner* (as opposed to outer) awareness of the subject's phenomenally conscious mental states (Gertler 2001; Chalmers 2003; Strawson 2017 among many others). I will narrow the scope of my discussion to the introspective domain because acknowledging the existence of perceptual acquaintance seems to require endorsing a fairly specific kind of theory of perception, namely direct realism. Such a theoretical commitment lies beyond the scope of this paper. To get a better grip on the notion of direct awareness of an experience compare these two cases. When you have neck pain, I might be *indirectly* aware of your pain, say, by being inferentially aware of it based on your grimace or your verbal reports. When *I* have neck pain, I am not inferentially aware of the pain in virtue of being aware of something else: I am aware of the pain *directly*. This intimate unmediated contact with an experience is

⁵ I will set aside theories that claim that we are acquainted with *universals*, either in introspection or in perception (e.g., Chalmers 2013, Pautz 2007). As these positions are largely minority views, I will limit my discussion to considering acquaintance as a relation that puts us in direct contact with *particulars*, remaining as neutral as possible on the nature of these particulars, e.g., on their abstractness (i.e., tropes) or concreteness (i.e., property instantiations).

⁶ See Duncan (2021) for a thorough review of contemporary accounts of acquaintance.

precisely what the notion of introspective acquaintance aims to capture.⁷

Introspective acquaintance, as I will utilize the concept in the ensuing discussion, could be defined as the subject's epistemically and metaphysically direct and immediate awareness of their experiences. It is *epistemically direct* in that the subject's awareness of the experience in question is non-inferential nor is it dependent upon the awareness of anything else. It is *metaphysically direct* in the sense that the subject's relation to the experience is not mediated by any causal process (Gertler 2011). Introspection is the distinctively first-personal way of learning about one's own ongoing mental states or processes (Schwitzgebel 2024). Introspective acquaintance, I assume, plays a role in the first-personal process of learning about our ongoing phenomenally conscious mental states. Typically, introspection is thought to require some form of attention to the relevant experiences. To introspect an ongoing experience, one needs to attend to it.⁸ Conscious attention is thus the other crucial ingredient in the acquisition of IAK.

2.2 *Conscious Attention*

I will restrict my claim to *conscious* attention because I take it that a blindsighter might *unconsciously* attend to a visual stimulus in the blind spot of their visual field, but since they cannot consciously attend to it, they cannot *introspect* the relevant mental state. In this paper, I will assume a structuralist view of conscious attention (cf. Watzl 2017).⁹ On such a view conscious attention is the subject's personal level capacity to (re)structure their phenomenal field so that some experiences in it are relatively more central than others. Attention creates centrality relations in virtue of which some experiences are more central, and some are more peripheral. According to a structuralist view of attention, these centrality relations are understood as a structural feature of consciousness (Watzl 2017: 251). Furthermore, it is important to highlight that attention is often thought to be a graded phenomenon. Both in philosophy of mind and in experimental psychology (as well as in folk psychology for that matter) attention is typically thought to come in degrees (see Pitts et al. 2018 for empirical evidence and Lopez 2024a for an overview). Note that the gradualist conception of attention is orthogonal to the metaphysics of attention. The idea of degrees of attention can be adopted as much by structuralist theories as by other views (e.g.,

⁷ I will use the expressions "experiences" and "phenomenally conscious mental states" interchangeably. In both cases, I am referring to mental states there is something it is like for a subject to be in.

⁸ Maja Spener (2023) distinguishes two distinct varieties of introspective access to presently conscious mental states, i.e., first-personal modes of cognitive access to currently conscious mental states that enable the formation of introspective knowledge. One of these introspective modes is *inner attention*, defined as "an active, typically deliberate intention-guided focus on one's current experience" (Ivi: 160). However, Spener admits a kind of introspective access that *prima facie* does not seem to involve attention. What she calls '*inner apprehension*' is an introspective mode that is reminiscent of Brentano's (1874) 'inner perception' and is defined as "a passive, automatic, and non-focal or peripheral awareness of one's current experience which (typically or constitutively) comes along with having the experience—no special mental effort is required to obtain it" (Spener 2023: 160). I agree with Spener that we can introspectively access experiences that are not maximally attentive. We do have introspective knowledge of non-focally attentive experiences. However, I would not count her 'inner apprehension' as an utterly inattentive introspective mode. According to the structuralist view of attention I favor (Watzl 2017), attention is a necessary structural feature of consciousness: it is the subject's mental capacity in virtue of which consciousness is structured into a center and a structured periphery. In such a framework, one can legitimately claim that we can introspectively access experiences outside of the focus of attention without *ipso facto* claiming that we are in an utterly inattentive introspective mode. Spener's inner apprehension can thus be recast in terms of introspective access that is constituted by low or even minimal degrees of attention.

⁹ Throughout the paper, I will sometimes refer simply to 'attention' instead of 'conscious attention'; the former expression should be understood as an elliptical variant of the latter.

cognitive unison theory, Mole 2011: 83-86). Furthermore, the graded picture of attention best mirrors the first-personal phenomenological data about what is phenomenally more or less central in one's overall experience. An example that is often used to illustrate the phenomenologically manifest datum of the uneven distribution of attention involves a scenario where a subject is immersed in the experience of attending a concert (cf. Kriegel 2009, Watzl 2017). Imagine an individual who deliberately directs their attention toward the sound of the lead guitar. It is intuitively clear that the sound of the drums and the slight sensation of pain in the subject's left ankle are not inattentive in the same sense. What the example is meant to show is that attention does not work like a one-place spotlight that picks an experiential part out of a homogeneous background. Intuitively, the bodily sensation of a faint pain in the ankle is not allocated the same amount of attentional resources, despite being both non-focal experiences. The auditory experience of the drums is relatively more focal than the bodily sensation. This arguably implies that the attentional background is itself structured into degrees of relative priority (Watzl 2017). Therefore, the idea that the conscious field is structured into degrees of relative priority matches the phenomenological datum.

2.3 *Introspective Acquaintance Knowledge*

Various authors (Duncan 2020; Atiq 2021; Giustina 2022) have argued that by being directly and attentively aware of a conscious state, the subject thereby acquires non-propositional knowledge of it. For instance, being in a conscious state of elation and paying at least a minimal amount of attention to it would lead me to know the phenomenal character of my elation: I would come to know *it*, rather than just some truths *about* it. For instance, I can know the phenomenology of my present mood without knowing *that* elation is what I am experiencing now. The underlying idea is that in being attentively acquainted with an experience the subject has an epistemic grasp of what it is like to have that token experience. The relation of acquaintance is thus taken to constitute a *sui generis* kind of knowledge, where by *sui generis* kind of knowledge, I mean a kind of knowledge that is not reducible to any other kind of knowledge (cf. Giustina 2022). According to this view of the epistemic significance of acquaintance, its epistemic role is not limited to the fact that it might produce, enable, or justify some form of propositional knowledge that is *based on* the acquaintance with a particular (see Gertler 2001 and Chalmers 2003 as examples of the latter view). On the contrary, acquaintance itself is thought to contribute *constitutively* to knowledge.

The knowledge constituted by acquaintance with one's experiences will be a kind of *introspective* knowledge, as it involves attending to the presently conscious states we are directly aware of in order to learn about their phenomenology. IAK can thus be defined as a *sui generis* kind of knowledge of the phenomenal character of our experiences that is constituted by the subject's attentive acquaintance with them. As I said, I am going to assume that IAK exists.

3. Better or Worse IAK

Now that I have clarified the key notions at play, let me provide an initial explication of the view

I am proposing. What I argue for is that the subject's direct introspective awareness of their experiences can be better or worse from an epistemic point of view. IAK comes along a spectrum in that it can be epistemically better or worse. To be clear, I do not just mean that IAK can enable, produce, or justify further epistemic achievements—e.g., some propositional knowledge obtained via introspective acquaintance—that can be epistemically better or worse; what I am saying is that the *sui generis* acquaintance knowledge of our experiences *in itself* can be epistemically better or worse. Now, upon closer inspection, there are at least two distinct ways of spelling out the idea of better/worse IAK. According to a first sense of the expression, we can have better/worse IAK if we are introspectively aware of more/less experiences: if I am introspectively acquainted with more experiences, I am epistemically better off because I know more things (I know more experiences by acquaintance). This is not the sense I am interested in since the idea that I want to capture is that the subject's introspective awareness of one and the same experience can itself be better or worse in epistemic respects. That is, for any experience *E* of a subject *S*, if *S* is attentively acquainted with *E*, *S* has IAK of *E* and *S*'s IAK of *E* can be epistemically better or worse.

The phenomenon I am latching onto is that we can have better IAK insofar as we are better introspectively acquainted with an experience. More precisely, one can have a better or worse immediate epistemic grasp of an experience, depending on the degree of attentional prioritization that the relevant experience undergoes.¹⁰ To make this point more vivid, consider this example. When my wisdom tooth aches and I am absorbed in some other attention-demanding tasks, the pain occupies a relatively peripheral position in my attentional structure. When I decide to focus my attention on the pain, I have a better epistemic access to the phenomenology of the pain. I better acquaintance-know how it feels to have it.

Some proponents of acquaintance knowledge have emphasized an intimate connection between the intrinsic epistemic significance of acquaintance and attention. For instance, Atiq (2021: 23) maintains that “various attentional acts enable acquaintance’s final epistemic value.” Similarly, Gertler (2001: 323) argues that epistemically significant awareness of a phenomenal token is constituted by attention to it. My proposal aims to elucidate that connection by spelling out the relation between our attentional acts and the normative status of introspective acquaintance.

In my view, attention injects normativity into IAK in that it enables the subject to get a better epistemic grasp of an experience they are acquainted with. Two distinct episodes of IAK can thus be compared with respect to (at least) one normative dimension: the degree of attention on which each depends. Thus, *ceteris paribus*, for any two IAK episodes, IAK₁ and IAK₂, if the introspective acquaintance that is constitutive of IAK₁ involves a higher degree of attention than the one that is constitutive of IAK₂, then IAK₁ is epistemically better than IAK₂.

There are multiple ways to articulate what exactly this ‘epistemic better-ness’ consists of. I will come back to this issue in Section 5. The specifics of a conception of the relevant epistemic gain

¹⁰ The epistemic grasp that acquaintance affords can be understood in various ways. Some take it as a primitive notion (e.g., Atiq 2021), while others (e.g., Coleman 2019; Giustina 2022) analyze it in terms of exclusion of epistemic possibilities: by becoming acquainted with a given experience, one is *ipso facto* in a position to rule out at least some epistemic possibilities—i.e., possible ways the actual world might be—in which one is not having an experience with the same phenomenal character. In this paper, I do not commit to any particular interpretation, as nothing crucial hinges on this point.

depend on several theory-dependent factors, particularly concerning the metaphysics of experiences. Depending on how we understand what happens at the metaphysical level to an experience once it is attentively prioritized, different conceptions of the epistemic better-ness of IAK will emerge. To offer a preliminary, admittedly sketchy, clarification of what I have in mind, one might think of the relevant epistemic improvement in terms of introspective acquaintance with a *more determinate* phenomenology. Returning to the toothache example, one can think that when I focus my attention on the pain, the phenomenal location and the quality of the unpleasant sensation become more determinate. After the attention shift, I am acquainted with—therefore I introspectively acquaintance-know—a more specific sensation of lightly pulsating dull pain in my gum whereas, when the sensation was more peripheral, I was merely acquainted with a sensation of indeterminate pain.

In sum, on the assumption that the subject's direct awareness of their experiences constitutes IAK of their phenomenal character, my suggestion is that IAK's degrees of epistemic goodness depend on degrees of attention. Hence, the relevant epistemic norm that governs the acquisition of IAK can be spelled out by means of the following deontic conditional:

Attention Norm: all else being equal, if there is a compelling reason for you to better acquaintance-know an experience *E*, you ought to pay more attention to *E*.

Here is my proposed argument:

(P1). One hallmark of the normative status of knowledge is that it can be epistemically better or worse.

(P2). IAK can be epistemically better or worse depending on the degrees of conscious attention involved.

(C). Therefore, (we have good reasons for thinking that) IAK has the normative status of knowledge

The argument aims to demonstrate how IAK is subject to at least one epistemic norm that regulates its acquisition. Moreover, if the argument goes through, IAK should be considered as an epistemic standing that is subject to imperfections in that it can be epistemically bad or epistemically not-so-good depending on the way it adheres to the overarching norm. Conversely, IAK can be considered an epistemic achievement in that its acquisition reflects the successful application of the relevant epistemic norm.¹¹ Thus, ultimately, in seeking to endow acquaintance knowledge with a normative dimension, this paper tries to advance the endeavor of

¹¹ It is worth noting that it is at least metaphysically possible for some entity to possess IAK that is always perfect while still being subject to epistemic norms. A useful parallel can be drawn with divine knowledge: God's knowledge is infallible and maximally good, yet it is *knowledge* and, as such, it is governed by epistemic normativity. However, as human subjects, we investigate epistemic normativity within a context where our knowledge—both propositional and by acquaintance—is not invariably perfect but instead varies in epistemic quality. Thus, while perfection and normativity can coexist, in our case, epistemic normativity is most saliently manifest through the gradability of knowledge's epistemic quality. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.

demonstrating how such a *sui generis* kind of epistemic stance deserves the title of knowledge. In what follows, I will proceed to defend the premises of the argument.

4. Defending (P1)

4.1 Epistemic Evaluability

To defend (P1) I will first show how in the paradigm case of knowledge—i.e., propositional knowledge—a piece of knowledge can be epistemically better or worse in virtue of the epistemic gradability of one of its constitutive epistemic components—i.e., justification. A higher degree of justification thus entails better propositional knowledge.¹² At the end of this Section, I will show how this connects to the normative status of knowledge.

Intuitively, justification directly impacts a true belief's reliability, credibility, and rational standing. More robust or higher-quality justification enhances the strength of a belief, making it more likely to be true, more resistant to counterevidence, and more aligned with epistemic norms. A piece of propositional knowledge can be considered epistemically better or worse based on the degree of justification it has because more/better justification strengthens the relevant belief, making it epistemically better. The epistemic goodness/badness of the belief thus depends on the degree of justification it has. To illustrate this, consider a subject, John, who believes the proposition "It will rain tomorrow" at two different times: t_1 and t_2 . At t_1 , John's belief is based on a weather forecast he heard a few days ago, providing him with some justification for his belief. However, by t_2 , John has checked the latest forecast, which now includes additional data and stronger predictions for rain. As a result, his belief that "It will rain tomorrow" at t_2 is epistemically better than his belief at t_1 , precisely because the justification at t_2 is stronger due to the new and more reliable evidence he has acquired. This increase in justification enhances the epistemic standing of the belief, making it more robust and less susceptible to error. Therefore, that in virtue of which a true belief is epistemically better or worse is the degree of justification: if a belief B_1 is more justified than a belief B_2 , then B_1 is epistemically better than B_2 . One's epistemic standing can therefore be better or worse from an epistemic point of view.¹³ This depends on the degree of justification we have for believing a certain proposition. In the next subsection, I will focus on epistemic justification, and I will make a case that it is an epistemically gradable phenomenon.

4.2 Degrees of Justification

Justification *qua* constitutive epistemic dimension of propositional knowledge is epistemically

¹² I do not have the space for an extensive coverage of the topic of epistemic gradability in its entirety. Therefore, I will focus solely on the case of propositional knowledge. The dialectical restriction is warranted by two reasons: on the one hand, propositional knowledge is often treated as the paradigmatic case of knowledge; on the other hand, the gradable epistemic evaluability of other putative *sui generis* kinds of knowledge (e.g., knowledge-how, understanding) is less controversial and would require less argumentative work.

¹³ There are other components of propositional knowledge that may also come in degrees. For instance, beliefs are thought to display gradability - one can believe something more or less due to confidence levels. However, what is relevant to the present discussion is the gradable component of knowledge that accounts for its varying degrees of *epistemic* goodness or badness. Therefore, I am interested in the gradable aspect that is tied to the normative dimension of knowledge. Degrees of confidence are arguably a *psychological* aspect of belief formation.

gradable. By “constitutive epistemic component of knowledge,” I mean an element that is arguably necessary for knowledge, an (or one of the) element(s) into which a kind of knowledge can be analyzed. By “epistemic gradability” I mean the property of a constitutive epistemic component of knowledge to be gradable, that is to exhibit degrees. Degrees are values of some dimension ordered over a scale. A constituent of knowledge is epistemically gradable when its quantity and/or its quality can vary along a scale. In epistemology, there is an ongoing debate concerning the kind of gradability—if any—that characterizes justification (Goldman 1979 [2008]; Siscoe 2021; Fassio and Logins 2023). What I will argue is that justification features two distinct kinds of epistemic gradability: *quantitative epistemic gradability* (varying in amount) and *qualitative epistemic gradability* (varying in kind). As I will argue in more detail, justification exhibits both quantitative and qualitative epistemic gradability. It exhibits quantitative epistemic gradability in that a subject may be more or less justified in believing that *p*. For instance, the gradability of justification might be grounded in the *amount* of evidence available to the subject (the more evidence for *p* is available to subject S, the more justification S has for believing that *p*). Justification is also qualitatively gradable in that, as I will show, a piece of justification can be qualitatively stronger than another.

On an evidentialist view, quantitative gradability concerns how much evidence a subject has for *p*: the more evidence one possesses, the greater the justification. Qualitative gradability, by contrast, tracks differences in justificatory strength between types of evidence. Take for example a true belief that John forms under normal conditions, basing it on evidence that is not rebutted or undercut by any defeater, such as “I believe that the sky is gray today”. John’s belief can be supported by perceptual evidence (directly seeing the sky), memorial evidence (recalling a weather forecast), or testimonial evidence (being told by someone else), or a combination thereof. These kinds of evidence have different degrees of justificatory power with respect to the same belief. In the case at hand, *ceteris paribus*, perceptual evidence has a stronger justificatory power than testimonial evidence (at least partly) because in the latter case the causal chain that connects the formation of John’s true belief (or more accurately the basing of the belief on the relevant evidence) and the state of affairs in question (e.g., the sky’s being gray at a certain time) is longer, thereby increasing the possibility of errors along the chain. Therefore, for any given belief, there might be evidence of different kinds that can be located along a scale of discrete values that identify different associated degrees of justificatory power.

So, the evidence on which John bases his belief has a degree of justificatory power, and this degree can be increased either by accumulating more evidence of the same kind or by acquiring evidence of another kind with a qualitatively, intrinsically greater degree of justificatory power. Crucially, the relevant true belief that constitutes a given piece of propositional knowledge will be epistemically better or worse depending on the amount and quality of evidence that supports it.

Note that, *mutatis mutandis*, similar considerations apply across different theories of justification. On a reliabilist view, justification varies with the reliability of the belief-forming process—the relevant mental processes can be more or less reliable—a feature that is often spelled out in terms of its tendency to output mostly true beliefs—and this makes the relevant true belief epistemically

better or worse.¹⁴ Further, a reliabilist could consistently maintain that one mental capacity—say, introspection—has a lesser degree of reliability than another mental capacity such as, say, perception. Similarly, on a coherentist view, justification is a function of how well a belief coheres with a larger belief system, and coherence itself comes in degrees. A single true belief can be epistemically better or worse depending on the degree of coherence.

In sum, justification, a distinctive component of propositional knowledge, can be said to display epistemic gradability, either in the quantitative sense or in the qualitative one. The relevant belief can be epistemically better or worse as a function of how well-justified the belief is.

4.3 Better or Worse Propositional Knowledge

Now, not only can *beliefs* be epistemically better or worse, but knowledge itself can also vary in its epistemic quality. The epistemic improvability of a belief *qua* constitutive epistemic component of propositional knowledge gives us good reasons to think that a piece of propositional knowledge itself can likewise be epistemically better or worse as a function of the degree of justification that constitutes it.¹⁵

Semantic considerations provide some motivation for this view. At least as long as we are inclined to believe that the semantics of knowledge ascriptions can tell us something about the nature of knowledge, the gradability exhibited by some ‘know that’ ascriptions seems to suggest that pieces of propositional knowledge can be better or worse *in virtue of* the degree of justification that constitutes them. As recognized by several parties in the debate (e.g., Stanley 2005; Dutant 2007), know-that attributions and comparisons do not accept *quantitative* degree modification, as it is evident from infelicitous ascriptions such as ‘*John *knows a lot* that dolphins are mammals’ or ‘*John *knows that* dolphins are mammals *more* than you do.’ This seems to suggest that knowledge-that is not gradable but all-or-nothing: a subject cannot know more or less that *p*. However, propositional knowledge attributions felicitously take up *qualitative* degree modifications, as in ‘John *knows well that* he must not be caught off guard.’ Further, qualitative comparative constructions are also admissible: e.g., ‘John *knows better than* Jack that the source cannot be trusted.’¹⁶ Now, Kennedy and McNally (2005) have pointed out that these two kinds of

¹⁴ Again, *mutatis mutandis*, a similar story can be told for the account of justification adopted by theorists in virtue epistemology, roughly the view according to which what justifies a belief consists in part of the intellectual abilities that the believer employs to form it. In the case of *virtue reliabilism*, the intellectual virtues that are often mentioned are reliable, truth-conducive mental capacities such as introspection, memory, etc. In that case, then, we can apply the same considerations advanced for simple reliabilism. In the case of *virtue responsibilism*, the intellectual virtues are virtues of a responsible epistemic agent such as attentiveness, open-mindedness, etc. Arguably, such intellectual traits that make an epistemic difference do come in degrees and can be improved and skilled over time.

¹⁵ Note that if we were to admit the unanalyzability of the notion of knowledge, following a knowledge-first approach *à la* Williamson (2000), it would simply be less clear how to argue for or against the gradability of such a primitive notion of knowledge. On this approach, propositional knowledge may well exhibit some primitive epistemic evaluability. The position would at least be consistent with a primitivist spirit.

¹⁶ Stanley (2005) cites infelicitous qualitative comparative attributions as counterevidence. For instance, ‘*John *knows better than* Jack that Paris is the capital of France’ does not sound felicitous. I agree with Dutant (2007) in thinking that the reason these attributions sound odd is that it is difficult to imagine how such a scenario could occur. Even being born in Paris would hardly put someone in a position to know better than someone else that it is the capital of France. Conversely, since I have been grappling with this problem for some years, I am in a position to know better (at least I hope) than some other people that acquaintance constitutes a form of knowledge. It is possible that propositional knowledge’s degrees of epistemic goodness are ordered along a scale that is both lower and upper-closed, and that in the case of knowing the capital of France, the attribution picks out the maximum degree.

modifications (quantitative and qualitative), at least sometimes, concern two different kinds of scales. To appreciate this point, consider what happens with different types of adverbial modifications of the gradable adjective ‘written.’ When transitioning from ‘The chapter is partly written’ to ‘The chapter is well written,’ one is shifting from one type of scale to another. The former is a *quantitative* scale, whereas the latter is a *qualitative* one.

Dutant (2007) has extended this treatment to know-that attributions and argued that scalar semantic considerations show that propositional knowledge ascriptions are degree-modifiable in a qualitative sense. On Dutant’s (*Ibid.*) diagnosis, the qualitative modifiability of know-that ascriptions is explained by the fact that a subject can have better propositional knowledge in having better/more evidence. It seems plausible to explain the linguistic data by suggesting that, although propositional knowledge itself does not come in degrees along a numerical scale—evidenced by the infelicity of quantitative degree modifications—the *epistemic goodness* of a given piece of knowledge can nonetheless vary. That is, even though one cannot have *more or less* of a given piece of propositional knowledge, a given piece of propositional knowledge may be *better or worse*. The qualitative modification of “know that” supports the view that propositional knowledge can be better or worse in the sense that its epistemic goodness may be greater or lesser.¹⁷ The degree of justification determines the epistemic goodness of a given instance of knowledge-that: for example, having more evidence in favor of the same piece of knowledge enhances its epistemic goodness. Likewise, stronger evidence or evidence of a (contextually) superior kind (e.g., perceptual rather than testimonial evidence) increases the epistemic goodness of knowledge. Just as an increase in the amount of justification enhances knowledge’s goodness, so too does an improvement in the type of justification, both contributing to better epistemic standing. Thus, greater and/or better justification yields better knowledge—that is, knowledge with higher epistemic value.

In sum, while knowledge is sensitive to degrees of justification, it remains constrained by its all-or-nothing nature: one either knows or does not. However, within the domain of knowledge, we can still assess and compare its epistemic goodness.

4.4 Epistemic Evaluability as a Hallmark of Epistemic Normativity

What is to be explained in order to defend (P1) is the conceptual link between ‘epistemic evaluability’, that is the fact that a piece of knowledge can be epistemically better or worse, and ‘epistemic normativity.’ More precisely, (P1) claims that the fact that a piece of knowledge can be epistemically better or worse is a *hallmark* of its epistemic normative status. Admittedly, the term ‘hallmark’ is somewhat vague. However, the thesis should be understood as the claim that the fact that a piece of knowledge can be better or worse is a key indicator of its normativity. To put it differently, the presence of different values along the scale of epistemic goodness for a

¹⁷ An anonymous reviewer suggests that on an alternative interpretation of the linguistic datum, qualitatively modified knowledge attributions (e.g., “John knows better than Jack that *p*”) do not indicate that knowledge itself is gradable but rather reflect metacognitive differences—such as John’s knowledge that he knows that *p*. However, this interpretation is insufficient in that many comparative knowledge attributions clearly track first-order epistemic differences, such as differences in justification strength or evidential quality, rather than metacognition. Intuitively, in “The doctor knows far better than I do that the clinical condition is serious,” the comparison reflects an asymmetry between epistemic positions that arises from the doctor having more and better evidence on which to base their belief, rather than from possessing a higher-order belief.

piece of knowledge serves as a good diagnostic criterion for detecting the presence of a normative dimension that governs its acquisition. Continuing with the clinical metaphor, we could say that the epistemic evaluability of a piece of knowledge is a symptomatic manifestation of its normative status. Now, why is that so?

Upon reflection, the connection at issue appears to be quite straightforward. Propositional knowledge is a normative phenomenon, as its *acquisition* is governed by various epistemic norms. For example, such norms prescribe that one should believe only what is true, or that one should ensure that one's beliefs are justified, or that one should strive to maintain coherence among one's beliefs, and so on. Intuitively, standards and norms also govern the *evaluation* of knowledge. The very evaluability of something as epistemically better or worse implies that there are standards against which it can be evaluated. The assessment of a belief or piece of knowledge as better or worse is *nothing over and above* the application of normative criteria. A belief or a piece of knowledge is evaluated based on how well it satisfies normative standards. What counts as good or bad in the epistemic domain depends on norms, such as, for example, requirements for evidence, coherence, and/or responsiveness to reasons. The fact that we can make these evaluations is evidence that epistemic normativity is at work.

One way to further illustrate the conceptual connection between evaluability and normativity might be the following. One epistemic norm that is typically regarded as crucial is certainly the justification norm: one ought to believe that p only if one has adequate justification for believing that p . This norm is thought to be extremely important in that for a belief to be knowledge it must not only be true but also properly justified. Epistemic normativity is manifestly connected with the epistemic goodness/badness of the relevant belief: other things being equal, if S believes that p unjustifiedly, S 's belief that p is epistemically bad; if S believes that q justifiedly, S 's belief that q is epistemically good. The justification norm that governs the domain of propositional knowledge requires us to hold epistemically good beliefs. When we consider some beliefs as epistemically better in that they are more justified, we acknowledge that there are normative standards of justification that a belief must meet. These standards prescribe how one ought to form and maintain beliefs to achieve epistemic goals. Therefore, the gradable epistemic evaluability is a distinctive manifestation of the underlying normativity.

5. Defending (P2)

5.1 Phenomenological Intuitions

Premise (P2) of the argument states that IAK can be epistemically better or worse depending on the degree of attention that is involved in it. First and foremost, it is worth noting that attention is arguably an epistemic good-making feature *in general*, as it generally serves to improve knowledge. As an example, consider the role conscious attention plays in the perceptual justification of perceptual beliefs. If one accepts the idea that attention has degrees, it seems difficult to deny that greater degrees of attention paid to an object O correspond to greater

degrees of justificatory power of the relevant belief about *O*.¹⁸ In normal conditions and absent defeaters, if I am focally attending to object *O*, the perceptual belief that I form about, say, the visual features of *O* will have a certain degree of (doxastic) justification. *Ceteris paribus*, if my attention is evenly distributed across the whole visual scene, the perceptual belief that I form about the visual features of *O* will be less (doxastically) justified with respect to the previous case. To appreciate this point, consider this example: *ceteris paribus*, I will be less justified in believing that there is a scarlet patch on the top left side of the screen when I am focused on the bottom right side than when I focus on the top left part where the patch is located. If I am focused on the bottom right side of the screen, I might still peripherally perceive a colored patch on the opposite side. Maybe that peripheral perception is even sufficient to justify a belief that there is a reddish patch on the top left side of the screen. However, higher degrees of attention will make me increasingly more justified in believing that the patch is scarlet. After all, the correlation between attentional degrees and perceptual discriminatory and classificatory capacity is quite straightforward (cf. Stazicker 2011). Similarly, I will be more justified in believing that my emotional state consists of anger mixed with a slight sense of envy when I focus my attention on this affective feeling compared to when my attention is directed toward other tasks that occupy the majority of my attentional resources. Thus, perceptual or introspective beliefs will be more justified on the basis of an experience that is attentively prioritized to a higher degree.

With regard to IAK, a primary source of support for the claim that IAK can be epistemically better or worse depending on attention stems from our pre-theoretical intuitions about the connection between attention and introspective access to our present experiences. There are intuitive cases in which a subject has better or worse IAK of some experiences depending on how much attention is allocated to them. Intuitively, it seems plausible that if we focus our attention on an experience, we know it better than we do when we are not focused on it, and it also seems reasonable to believe that an experience to which we give maximal attentional priority is known better than the experiences that are left in the attentional background.

To make these intuitions more vivid, consider the following example. When I go into the doctor's office and sit at their desk to tell them about the symptoms that afflict me, I often have to make an introspective effort to communicate my bodily sensations (let us suppose I have to report bodily symptoms). I have to tell them what I feel in some parts of my body. In particular, this introspective effort allows me to acquire more information about my bodily sensations. Assuming that direct awareness of my experiences constitutes a type of knowledge—i.e., IAK—we can say that the introspective effort required by the anamnestic examination involves the acquisition of introspective knowledge. Now, it seems rather plain that in similar cases what I call “introspective effort” has to do first and foremost with an *attentional* effort. When the otolaryngologist asks me to describe to the best of my communicative ability the sound of the tinnitus that has been tormenting me for days, I have to bring my introspective attention to that annoying feeble ringing that, moments before, occupied a semi-peripheral position in my phenomenal field, since, say, I was intent on answering other questions about my generalities. At

¹⁸ Those who maintain that (perceptual) experiences themselves provide *prima facie* justification for the corresponding (perceptual) beliefs (e.g., Pryor 2005) might recast this point simply by saying that the more attentive the experience, the greater its justificatory power.

least at first glance, it seems that when I give the tinnitus top attentional priority, so much so that it is placed at the very center of my current stream of consciousness, I know better how it feels. When I pay more attention, I have better epistemic access to the experience. I get to acquaintance know the phenomenology of the experience to a higher degree—i.e., I better acquaintance know it. Of course, I knew its phenomenology even before, when it was semi-peripheral. Indeed, that sound haunts and distresses me precisely because it persists in an intermediate position in the phenomenal field. However, the crucial point is that when I give it focal and sustained attention it seems as if I know it better.

To preempt potential misunderstandings, it is worth further clarifying the claim made in (P2). One might think that attention merely leads to a more fine-grained conceptualization of experience, thereby improving the subject's *propositional knowledge* about their experience rather than their IAK of the experience itself. However, I want to argue that IAK can be *intrinsically* (as opposed to merely instrumentally) epistemically better or worse depending on the degree of attention. In other words, attention plays an *intrinsic* epistemic role rather than a purely instrumental one at the level of IAK: it modulates the quality of IAK itself rather than (or in addition to) leading to more/better propositional knowledge by enabling a subject to categorize or describe their experiences with greater precision.

An example that may be useful in probing our intuitions on the subject is the case of the so-called body scan technique in the practice of mindfulness. Jon Kabat-Zinn, the renowned American biologist who founded the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program in 1979, has repeatedly defined this practice as follows: “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (1994: 4). The body scan is a mindfulness technique that is commonly meant to help individuals develop greater awareness of their presently conscious episodes. During body scan meditation, the individual is guided to focus their attention on different parts of their body, systematically shifting its focus from one part to another. As the goal of the practice is often presented, the aim is to observe any sensations or thoughts that pop up into the stream of consciousness without judgment and, crucially, by refraining from categorizing the various conscious episodes. Again, it seems intuitively plausible that there is a positive correlation between the degree of attentional centrality and the number of things we can learn about the conscious episode being “scanned.” In addition, if we take reports from experienced meditators at face value, we are led to believe that the attentional priority of an experience does not correlate in the same way with the level of categorization to which the relevant experience is subjected (cf. Lutz et al. 2008 and Malinowski 2013 for empirical discussion). It seems that in such practices more attention contributes to better acquaintance knowledge but not necessarily to a more determinate and fine-grained conceptualization of the relevant experience. The two aspects seem to be mutually independent.¹⁹ Such descriptions therefore seem to dissociate the gradual epistemic scope of attention from its function of cognitively accessing experiences that are prioritized. Thus, the fact that we have better epistemic

¹⁹ To this one could object that a better or more fine-grained categorization does depend, at least in part, on higher levels of attention. However, what I have in mind here is that although there plausibly is an asymmetric dependence between the *disposition* to a more fine-grained categorization and a higher level of attention, (higher degrees of) attention does not necessarily entail (a better) *occurrent* categorization.

access to our experiences in virtue of the degree of attention we pay to them is part of the common intuitions about the process of learning about our present conscious states.

To appreciate this point, consider a counterfactual scenario—a possible world we might call NON-COGNITIVE EARTH. This world is inhabited by phenomenal creatures whose cognitive architecture lacks the mental faculties usually included in the relational definition of cognitive accessibility. The non-cognitive earthers do not possess the consumer systems that, in our case (that is, at least, in the case of neurotypical human adults), process the information made available by attention: they lack, for example, conceptualization abilities, inferential abilities, mental capacities that underpin rational control of speech, action, verbal reportability, etc. Despite this, these beings have experiences akin to ours (differing only in that they lack the cognitive experiences we associate with those mental faculties). The phenomenal structure of their overall experience is otherwise arguably identical to ours: their conscious states are organized according to degrees of relative priority, with some occupying the center of their stream of consciousness while others remain more peripheral. Now, suppose that non-cognitive earthers have IAK of the phenomenology of their experiences simply by being immediately and directly aware of them. Crucially, even in the absence of cognitive accessibility, they still seem to have better or worse acquaintance knowledge of their experiences, depending on where those experiences fall within the attentional structure of consciousness.²⁰ A non-cognitive earther would have a superior epistemic grasp of an experience that is prominent, salient, and centrally positioned in their stream of consciousness, as opposed to one that remains marginal or at the fringe of consciousness.

5.2 Better/Worse IAK: A Sketch of Some Possible Models

Since degrees of attention make IAK *non-instrumentally* epistemically better or worse, how should this variability in IAK's epistemic quality be accounted for? As noted in Section 3, there are several possible approaches, and the answer partly depends on the metaphysical framework one adopts regarding the nature of experiences. One option is to conceive of introspective attention as making the phenomenology of experience more determinate, thereby allowing us to become introspectively acquainted with a more specific phenomenal character. Imagine being plagued by a persistent stomachache that lingers at the periphery of your attention. The peripheral experience of the stomachache has some degree of indeterminacy; it is not grasped as determinately as possible. The conscious sensation is that of an indeterminate pain whose phenomenal location is

²⁰ It may be objected that if making experiences or features of experiences cognitively accessible is an *essential* function of attention, then non-cognitive earthers simply do not have the mental capacity of attention. This objection can be addressed in two distinct ways. On the one hand, it is possible to claim that the function of making information available to some cognitive consumer systems is only nomologically performed by attention. After all, Watzl's (2017) structuralist account of attention (to name just one popular view) revolves around the idea that the essential defining feature of attention just is the general-purpose capacity to alter priority structures. It is thus conceivable that attention does not have any functional role that can be articulated in terms of cognitive access. On the other hand, one can bite the bullet and claim that non-cognitive-earthers do not have 'attention proper,' as it were, but only a phenomenal/structural analog of attention. In this case, however, there would still be a metaphysically necessary connection between the quality of the IAK of an experience and the structural centrality of that experience in the phenomenal field. And, in the actual world, the ability to change the relative centrality of an experience is contingently performed by attention.

also vaguely located in the abdomen. When you shift your focus, the pain becomes more sharply defined—a stinging sensation at the pit of your stomach, accompanied by pinprick-like discomfort is now presented to you. After the attention switch, and precisely *in virtue* of the attention switch, the pain is grasped in a more determinate way. Crucially, being introspectively acquainted with more or less determinate phenomenal properties corresponds to introspectively acquaintance-know experiences better or worse. Importantly, the idea that attention enhances the phenomenal determinacy, precision, or vividness of an experience’s phenomenology is fairly widespread in the literature (see Nanay 2010; Stazicker 2011; Block 2015; Lopez 2024b; Lopez and Simsova 2024 among others).

Another possible approach has been explored by Coleman (2019), who argues that experiences possess qualitative parts that can exist outside the scope of acquaintance. For instance, you might be peripherally aware of an underlying mood throughout the day, yet unable to fully grasp its richness and extent. However, when you later become focally aware of it, you gain acquaintance-knowledge of more of its qualitative parts or aspects. On this view, the epistemic difference between inattentive acquaintance with an experience and more attentive awareness is comparable to the “difference between glancing at a book’s spine and opening it to have a good browse. [When the stressful mood is inattentive] you are often aware of the ‘edge’ of the feeling, enough to mark it as a background state of tension [...]. When perusing it at leisure, all its extent and richness come into view” (Coleman 2019: 9).

A third option, more primitivist in spirit, can be seen as drawing inspiration from the Cartesian-Leibnizian tradition. According to this approach, introspective acquaintance with our conscious states inherently exhibits primitive degrees of clarity (cf. Paul 2020). What is at the center of the phenomenal field appears to us clearly and distinctly, while what lies at the attentional periphery is given to us less clearly, that is, in an obscure and confused manner. Descartes himself had in mind a close correlation between degrees of attention and degrees of clarity of perception (a term that in Cartesian terminology includes sensory perception, imagination, and intellectual grasping): e.g., “[My perception of the wax can be] imperfect and confused, as it was before, or clear and distinct, as it is now, depending on the degree to which I attend to what the wax consists in” (1996: M2, AT 7:31).²¹

Admittedly, this discussion remains sketchy, as my aim here is merely to outline some possible directions one might take rather than provide an exhaustive evaluation of these approaches. Due to space constraints, I cannot fully examine the metaphysical implications of these views or weigh their relative merits here. However, these considerations suggest that there are multiple viable ways to account for how attention modulates the epistemic quality of IAK.²²

²¹ An alternative approach is to suggest that, analogously to propositional knowledge, IAK is constituted by *awareness* (the counterpart of belief), *veridicality* (the analog of truth), and a normative component, which we might call *justification**, determined by attention. While this is a viable and promising avenue of exploration, it commits to the view that acquaintance is governed by veridicality conditions, thereby departing from the interpretation of acquaintance as an infallible, metaphysically direct relation of presentation with a particular adopted here. Instead, it arguably aligns more closely with a representationalist account of acquaintance, such as that proposed by Duncan (2020). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this alternative option.

²² I have explored the relation between the epistemic role of attention in IAK and the metaphysics of experience in much greater detail in other work (Pallagrosi 2025).

5.3 Objections and Replies

One potential worry might concern the impact that conscious attention can have on the phenomenology of the experiences being attended to. Some might contend that attention distorts the phenomenology of the experience to the extent that a more attentively introspected experience can actually be known to a *lesser* extent. This objection challenges the idea of a positive correlation between attention and acquaintance knowledge of experiences. The objection can take two different forms. On the one hand, someone might argue that the correlation between attention and IAK is consistently negative, meaning that attention systematically degrades the knowledge of the attended experience. So, every time I focus my attention on one of my conscious states, the knowledge I gain is worse than the knowledge I can get by being *inattentively* aware of it. On the other hand, it could be suggested that, in some cases, an increase in attention leads to an epistemic loss. For example, over-attention to a mood might, in some cases, worsen one's knowledge of it.

To the universally quantified version, we might respond that (i) this objection seems to outright reject the intuitions about the connection between greater attention and better knowledge. The objector bears the burden of providing some form of error theory to explain the opposing aforementioned intuitions; otherwise, the objection risks being a mere unsubstantiated rebuttal. Further, (ii) even if the strong correlation between attention and IAK were negative, this would not necessarily pose a problem for the bulk of my argument regarding the normativity of IAK. If the argument is sound, attention would still determine the normative dimension of IAK in virtue of its gradual epistemic role. The only difference would be that this epistemic role would be negative. Peripheral experiences would be better acquaintance-known compared to those that occupy higher degrees of attention.

According to the second variant of the objection, an increase in attention might sometimes lead to a deterioration in IAK. To begin with, the nature of these supposed cases of attentional distortion is far from fully clear. Arguably, it is the objector's burden to present credible systematic evidence that substantiates this claim. Without well-defined cases that demonstrate introspective attention being episodically epistemically harmful, the objection merely relies on anecdotal or vacuously hypothetical counterexamples.

That said, it is important to reiterate that my argument posits that, given an experience E , and IAK_1 of E at t_1 and IAK_2 of E at t_2 , *other things being equal*, IAK_2 is epistemically superior to IAK_1 due to the higher degree of attention involved in IAK_2 . This does not exclude the possibility that, in some cases, some context-dependent higher-order defeater might negatively impact on introspective access to experiences. For example, my knowledge of the anxious mood I am focusing on might be worse than the knowledge I had of it when my awareness of it was less attentive because, the moment I concentrate on it, I am automatically drawn into a stream of conscious thoughts about, say, the remote causes of my anxiety. Episodes of over-attention to an experience—as they are sometimes referred to in folk terminology—might entail a negative epistemic impact. However, on a plausible understanding of what over-attention is, the attentive mode probably consists of reflective cognitive attention to the relevant experience. Reflective

cognitive attention to an experiential token just is the prioritization of one or more reflective thoughts about it. As a result, the negative epistemic effects do not derive from the prioritization of the relevant experiential token itself, but from the cognitive interference, so to speak, of other mental states (e.g., judgments, affective responses, etc.) that enter the top positions in the priority structure, thereby temporarily disrupting optimal epistemic access to the target experience. These other mental states are intrusive distractors that might function as epistemic defeaters. One possible effect of such defeaters is over-intellectualization of the introspected experience: the attempt to prioritize, say, a mood experience in some cases might be causally related to the production (and subsequent automatic attentional prioritization) of different cognitive states that are about the mood and try to evaluate and/or interpret the affective experience. This might in turn cause an update in the priority structure to the effect that the mood gets to be relatively deprioritized. Therefore, the occasional epistemic loss at issue is explained by the fact that distractors take center stage in the phenomenal field, causing the target experience to recede. It is not attention to the target experience *per se* that degrades the knowledge of it.

Another possible objection concerns a much more destructive distortion allegedly operated by attention. According to this objection, attention does not merely degrade the knowledge of the experience; it fundamentally alters the very nature of the experience itself (Brentano 1874: 30). As a result, when an experience becomes more central in the conscious field, it is altered to the extent that the resulting experience is no longer the same as the one that previously resided at the periphery (and *vice versa*). The objection could be condensed into the following argument: (1) experiences are individuated by their phenomenology; (2) attentional changes alter the phenomenology of experiences; therefore, (3) attentional changes produce numerically different experiences. This would entail that we cannot sensibly claim to have better or worse IAK of one and the same experience depending on the degree of attention.

Providing an exhaustive response to this objection would arguably require addressing complex metaphysical issues regarding the criteria of individuation for experiences, which I do not have the space to explore here. However, it is worth noting that there are ways to resist the idea that attention causes such dramatic alterations in experiences. For instance, Giustina (2023) suggests that shifts in an experience's position within centrality structures lead to changes in some of its phenomenal properties, but these changes do not affect the set of *essential* phenomenal properties that individuate the experience. According to Giustina (*Ibid.*), the phenomenal character of an experience consists of instantiations of three categorically distinct types of phenomenal properties. Experiences instantiate (or are constituted by) *qualitative phenomenal properties*: namely, phenomenal properties like the painfulness of a pain experience, the bluishness of a visual experience of blue, etc. These are intrinsic, non-relational properties that determine the qualitative character of the experience. Their functional role is tightly connected to the ability to discriminate and type-identify two qualitatively different experiences, such as an experience with a painful character vis à vis one with a pleasurable character. Secondly, experiences are also intuitively thought to instantiate (or be constituted by) *quantitative phenomenal properties*. These are gradational properties that pick out some magnitudes of the experience. Giustina (*Ibid.*) characterizes them as properties in virtue of which qualitative phenomenal properties are modulated. They can be thought of as either second-order properties of qualitative phenomenal

properties, as their adverbial modifications, or as additional first-order properties of the experience. A fairly straightforward example of such a property is intensity. My anxiety can vary in intensity—it can either diminish or increase—and it can be sensibly compared to other tokens of the same type of affective experience along the dimension of its phenomenal intensity. Finally, there are *relational phenomenal properties*: they include the phenomenally significant centrality relations that on a structuralist view are thought to be modified by conscious attention (e.g., the property of an experience of pain of being less peripheral than other experiences).

Now, conscious attention modifies the *relational* phenomenal properties of experiences and plausibly has a modulatory effect on (at least some of) their *quantitative* phenomenal properties. For instance, given an experience of migraine, an attentional shift might change its relational phenomenal properties when it captures my attention and is made relatively more central in the phenomenal field, as well as modulate its quantitative properties by increasing, say, its perceived intensity or salience. However, the distinctive qualities of the migraine—its qualitative phenomenal properties that define its pulsating painful quality—intuitively seem to remain unchanged across the attention shift. Crucially, for Giustina (*Ibid.*), these qualitative phenomenal properties are the only ones that determine the phenomenal essence of the experience. Relational and quantitative phenomenal properties, on the other hand, are accidental properties that an experience can change or lose without ceasing to be what it is. Our phenomenological intuitions seem to support this line of thought: we are naturally inclined to judge that one and the same experience can fluctuate in intensity and shift in centrality within our stream of consciousness without ceasing to be the same experience. Intuitively, a pain that gradually subsides is naturally experienced as a single pain episode decreasing in intensity, rather than as a very long series of numerically distinct but increasingly weaker pain experiences. Similarly, we are inclined to judge that a tinnitus sound that is initially peripheral but becomes more central when one attends to it remains the same auditory experiential token before and after the attention shift.

This, in my view, is the most promising way to address the objection. However, someone with a more stringent criterion for the individuation of experiences might follow a suggestion by Giustina and Kriegel (2024) and argue that even if attention is destructive, to the extent that when an experience E_1 undergoes an attentional shift, E_1 is destroyed and replaced by a numerically different experience E_2 , the relation between E_1 and E_2 —which they call the ‘successor relation’—is sufficiently intimate to allow my core argument to remain largely intact. In fact, with the addition of a small epicycle, premise (P2) could be reformulated as follows without encountering significant obstacles: IAK of an experience and its successors can be epistemically better or worse depending on the degree of attention involved.

One might object that this would introduce a disanalogy between IAK and propositional knowledge. While increased justification enhances the epistemic quality of the same belief, individuated by the same propositional content, increased attention fundamentally modifies the phenomenal character of an experience—that is, the very object of IAK. While I acknowledge this dissimilarity, I argue that it does not undermine the core of my proposal, because strict numerical identity of experience is not necessary for the gradability of IAK—what matters is the intimate similarity between successive experiences. The subject's IAK at t_2 is epistemically better

than their IAK at t_1 not because it is of the numerically same experience, but because the transition from E_1 to E_2 preserves an epistemically relevant structural continuity. This epistemic continuity is strong enough for IAK to remain a gradable epistemic state: the experience at t_2 is not an arbitrary replacement but an attentional refinement of the earlier experience. The successor relation thus ensures sufficient similarity and intimate continuity between some objects of introspective acquaintance, allowing it to be epistemically evaluable.²³

In general, then, the response I favor allows one and the same experience to be the target of more or less attentive acquaintance, but it does so at the cost of a specific commitment to the individuation of experiences—namely, that only qualitative phenomenal properties are essential. As a result, guaranteeing the identity of experience across attentional shifts cannot be a theory-neutral move with respect to the metaphysics of experiences. However, this is an unavoidable feature of any complete account of the epistemic role of introspective attention. Any such account must make some commitment about the metaphysics of experience, and the proposal outlined here, while not without controversy, aligns with our intuitions about experience individuation. Moreover, even if one rejects this framework, an alternative route remains available: the successor relation view, which preserves the gist of the idea that IAK is epistemically gradable as a function of attention without requiring strict numerical identity of experiences.

6. Concluding remarks

I have argued for the idea that conscious attention introduces normativity into IAK. We can encapsulate this finding in the following slogan: the more attention—i.e., the higher the degree of attention—the better the IAK. Attention is a mental capacity that can gradually contribute to knowledge acquisition and plays a crucial role in IAK, as it determines its normative dimension. Thus, IAK can be better or worse in virtue of the varying degrees of attention that are involved. IAK can therefore be improved, perfected, and skilled, and some of its episodes can be compared and evaluated along an internal dimension. This feature aligns this epistemic standing with paradigmatic cases of knowledge and helps to dissipate the aura of mystery and oddness often lamented by detractors of acquaintance knowledge. In other words, identifying a normative dimension for IAK reinforces its continuity with the other kinds of knowledge that are more palatable to traditional epistemologists. Moreover, as we have seen, this proposal regarding the composition and variability of IAK matches our ordinary intuitions about the correlation between attentional effort and the acquisition of introspective knowledge.

This set of considerations ultimately strengthens the case for the existence of this peculiar type of knowledge and takes another step towards advancing a research program that, although still in its embryonic stage, is rapidly coalescing around the notion of acquaintance knowledge.²⁴

²³ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.

²⁴ I am grateful to Anna Giustina, Uriah Kriegel, Matt Duncan, and Bruno Cortesi for their insightful comments on this material. Thanks to two anonymous reviewers whose comments have significantly enriched the paper.

References

- Atiq, E. (2021). Acquaintance, Knowledge, and Value. *Synthese* 199: 14035-14062.
- Atiq, E. (Forthcoming). Knowledge by Acquaintance and Impartial Virtue. *Philosophical Studies*.
- Atiq, E. and M. Duncan. (Forthcoming). I Feel Your Pain: Acquaintance and the Limits of Empathy. *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Mind* 4.
- Block, N. (2015). The Puzzle of Perceptual Precision. In T. Metzinger & J. M. Windt (Eds.), *Open mind* (Vol. 5). MIND Group.
- Brentano, F. (1874). *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, L. L. McAlister, (Ed.), A. C. Rancurello, D. B. Terrell, and L. L. McAlister (Trans.). London; New York: Routledge.
- Brewer, B. (2004). Realism and the Nature of Perceptual Experience. *Philosophical Issues*, 14(1), 61–77.
- Campbell, J. (2002). *Reference and Consciousness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chalmers, D.J. (2003). The Content and Epistemology of Phenomenal Belief, in Smith, Q. and Jokic, A. (Eds.), *Consciousness: New Philosophical Perspectives*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1-54.
- Chalmers, D. (2013). The Contents of Consciousness: Reply to Hellie, Peacocke, and Siegel. *Analysis*, 73(2), 345–368.
- Coleman, S. (2019). Natural Acquaintance, In: Knowles, J., Raleigh, T. (Eds.), *Acquaintance: New Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Conee, E. (1994). Phenomenal Knowledge. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 72: 136-150.
- Descartes, R. (1996). *Oeuvres de Descartes*, C. Adam and P. Tannery, (Eds.), 11 vols. Paris: Vrin. (Originally published in 1897 by Cerf.)
- Duncan, M. (2020). Knowledge of Things. *Synthese* 197: 3559-3592.
- Duncan, M. (2021). Acquaintance. *Philosophy Compass* 16: e12727.
- Duncan, M. (2021). Experience is Knowledge. *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Mind* 1: 106-129.
- Dutant, J. (2007). The Limited Gradability of ‘Knows’. Accessed July 9, 2024, from http://julien.dutant.free.fr/papers/JDutant_TheLimitedGradabilityOfKnow.pdf
- Fassio, D., & Logins, A. (2023). Justification and gradability. *Philosophical Studies*, 180, 2051–2077.
- Fiocco, M.O. (2017), Knowing Things in Themselves, *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 94, 332–358.
- Fumerton, R. (1995). *Metaepistemology and Skepticism*. Lanham, Ma: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Gertler, B. (2001), Introspecting Phenomenal States, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 63, 2, 305-28.

- Gertler, B. (2011), *Self-knowledge*, New York, NY: Routledge.
- Giustina, A. (2022). Introspective Knowledge by Acquaintance. *Synthese* 200:128.
- Giustina, A. (2023). Introspective Acquaintance: An Integration Account. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 31(2), 380–397.
- Giustina, A., Kriegel, U. (2024). Inner Awareness: The Argument from Attention. *Philosophical Studies*.
- Kabat-Zinn J. (1994). *Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life*. New York: Hyperion.
- Kennedy, C., & McNally, L. (2005). Scale Structure and the Semantic Typology of Gradable Predicates. *Language*, 81(2), 345–381.
- Kriegel, U. (2009). *Subjective Consciousness: A Self-Representational Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kriegel, U. (2024). Knowledge-by-Acquaintance First. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.13051>
- Lopez, A. L., (2024a). Degrees of Attention and Degrees of Consciousness. In Hvorecký, J., Marvan, T., & Polák, M. (Eds.). *Conscious and Unconscious Mentality: Examining their Nature, Similarities, and Differences*, Routledge, 229-250.
- Lopez, A. (2024b). Attention and Representational Precision. In R. French and B. Brogaard (Eds.), *The Roles of Representations in Visual Perception*. Springer.
- Lopez, A. and Simsova, E. (2024). Enhanced but Indeterminate? How Attention Colors our World. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 15 (4):1349-1373.
- Lutz, A., Slagter, H. A., Dunne, J. D., & Davidson, R. J. (2008). Attention Regulation and Monitoring in Meditation. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 12(4), 163–169.
- Malinowski P (2013) Neural Mechanisms of Attentional Control in Mindfulness Meditation. *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, P 7:8.
- Martin, M. G. F. (2002). The Transparency of Experience. *Mind & Language*, 17, 376–425.
- McGinn, C. (2008). Consciousness as Knowingness, *The Monist* 91, 237–249.
- Mole, C. (2011). *Attention Is Cognitive Unison: An Essay in Philosophical Psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nanay, B. (2010). Attention and Perceptual Content. *Analysis*, 70(2), 263–270.
- Pallagrosi, J. (2025). *Introspective Acquaintance Knowledge: A Gradualist Proposal*. PhD Dissertation, University School for Advanced Studies IUSS Pavia.

- Pallagrosi, J. and Cortesi, B. (2024). The Stalemate Between Causal and Constitutive Accounts of Introspective Knowledge by Acquaintance, *Argumenta* 9, 2, 433—451.
- Paul S. E. (2020). Cartesian Clarity. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 20(19), 1-28.
- Pautz, A. (2007). Intentionalism and Perceptual Presence. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 21(1), 495–541.
- Pitt, D. (2019). Acquaintance and Phenomenal Concepts. In S. Coleman (ed.), *The Knowledge Argument*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pitts, M., A., Lyuda, A. Lutsyshyna, and S. A. Hillyard. (2018). The Relationship between Attention and Consciousness: An Expanded Taxonomy and Implications for 'No report' Paradigms. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 373 (1755): 20170348. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2017.0348>.
- Pryor, J. (2005). There is Immediate Justification. In M. Steup and E. Sosa (Eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*. Malden MA: Blackwell.
- Ranalli, C. (2023). Knowledge of Things and Aesthetic Testimony. *Inquiry*.
- Russell, B. (1910). Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 11: 108-128.
- Russell, B. (1912). *The Problems of Philosophy*. New York: Holt and Co. and London: William and Norgate.
- Schwitzgebel, E., (2024). "Introspection", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2024 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/introspection/>>.
- Siscoe, R. W. (2021). Belief, Rational and Justified. *Mind*, 130(517), 59–83.
- Spener, M. (2023). The Introspective Method. in Kriegel, U. (Ed.), *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Mind*. Volume 3. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stanley, J. (2005). *Knowledge and Practical Interests*. Oxford University Press.
- Stazicker, J. (2011). Attention, Visual Consciousness and Indeterminacy. *Mind & Language* 26 (2): 156–84.
- Strawson, G. (2017). *The Subject of Experience*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Tye, M. (2009). *Consciousness Revisited: Materialism without Phenomenal Concepts*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Watzl, S. (2017). *Structuring Mind. The Nature of Attention and How It Shapes Consciousness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Williamson, T. (2000). *Knowledge and Its Limits*, Oxford University Press.
- Wu, W. (2014). *Attention*, New York, NY: Routledge.