

Comments on Kelly Trogdon, "Phenomenal Concepts: Acquaintance and Demonstrative Thought"
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1. Summary

Kelly Trogdon's paper deals with a challenging constellation of issues in an admirably clear way. Trogdon begins by assuming that we are *acquainted* with the phenomenal. He then suggests that acquaintance consists in what he calls *directness* and *robustness*. Directness has three aspects:

- (1) That the content of the state of acquaintance is its referent.
- (2) That reference isn't secured by virtue of the satisfaction of a descriptive condition.
- (3) That reference isn't secured in virtue of some relation to another mental state with that content or referent.

Robustness is trickier to characterize. The first person point of view puts us in a position to have a *substantive and determinate grasp* on the phenomenological character of the experience.

Satisfying directness and robustness poses a challenge to proponents of the *demonstrative* approach to phenomenal concepts. It also presents a more general puzzle about how "experiential acquaintance" could satisfy both directness and robustness.

One immediate question: Since an analysis of acquaintance is supposed to imply directness and robustness, does this mean that the notion of experiential acquaintance itself is internally incoherent? If so, should this be taken as an objection to Trogdon's proposal for how to understand experiential acquaintance?

In what follows, I would like to raise a few questions for further clarification and discussion, and to make a gesture towards a kind of resolution.

I will agree here to play by Trogdon's methodological rules. First, I'm quite sympathetic that we should start from the ground up and deal with these issues as philosophically interesting in their own right, independent from debates over physicalism and reductive explanation. Second, though, I'll simply register Eric Schwitzgebel's recent (2008) arguments about the unreliability of introspection, including introspecting the phenomenological characteristics of experiences. If Schwitzgebel is right, then there are more serious methodological questions for Trogdon's story about phenomenal acquaintance. In particular, the questions concern not just Trogdon's grounds for claims about acquaintance with the phenomenal, but the status of the robustness claim itself, since robustness requires a substantive and determinate grasp that we might simply lack.

2. Phenomenal character

To begin, I'll ask for clarification of Trogdon's notion of phenomenal character, and thus of how

general he intends these lessons to be. He suggests that *if* phenomenal characters are *intrinsic* we can introspect intrinsic characteristics of experiences. But, it seems that he might be committed to something stronger than the conditional claim. For instance, if phenomenal properties are a subset of representational properties, then it is difficult to imagine attending to them as such. First, one might think that experiences afford merely "transparent" awareness of their objects and thereby thwart attempts to introspect intrinsic features of experiences. Alternatively, even if experience is not entirely transparent, how do we become acquainted with a relation between a subject and the object of an experience? It looks like the demands of acquaintance with the phenomenal require a view on which such characters are indeed intrinsic, even if "intrinsically intentional". So, I'd like to know about the target and thus about the generality of the results in question (especially given the initial methodological motivation).

3. Directness

Next, I'd like to ask about the relationship between acquaintance and directness.

The notion of directness of course isn't new to discussions of acquaintance, especially in the philosophy of perception. There have been a few different notions that have been important in that discussion, and sometimes they're run together. Two quite prominent ones differ in important respects from Kelly's notion, and it might be that neither of them runs into the kind trouble with robustness that he describes. So, we'll need to know why either of these isn't the understanding of directness appropriate to discussions of experiential acquaintance.

What's suggested by Kelly's notion of directness, and what he surely intends, is that of being unmediated or immediate. You're acquainted with some entity or feature in a way that is not mediated by, or doesn't depend upon, anything else.

But there's another sense of immediacy that's been important in discussions of awareness and representation, and that's the sense of it's not seeming to the subject *as if* one's awareness is mediated. In this sense, one does not enjoy awareness as of one thing in virtue of one's awareness *as of* something else. This sense has frequently been invoked in discussions of awareness and immediacy of perceptual representation, notably by Jackson.

Which of the two is at stake? Trogon's argument clearly relies on the former. But, first of all, he's trying to capture the *phenomenology* of experiential acquaintance and phenomenal thought -- he says on p. 2 that he's trying to capture the fact that it *seems* to the subject that one's awareness of the experience's character is *unmediated*. Second, he construes robustness in terms of the capacity to generate a "substantive grasp" which appears to depend only upon apparent contact with the relevant feature. Each of these indicates it's the second notion of immediacy at issue.

The problem with that, however, is that experiential immediacy or apparent directness *is* compatible with the sort of actual mediation that robustness requires. So, we might weaken our understanding of acquaintance from what Lycan describes as a 'strongly direct' view to what he describes as a

'weakly direct' view compatible with actual, if not experientially evident, mediation.

Taking a step back, though, I want to ask whether this is even the right place to be looking for the relevant notion of directness. Why is this semantic notion the one relevant to discussions of acquaintance? It certainly doesn't seem to be just what Russell had in mind by 'acquaintance'. His concerns were primarily epistemic.

Bermudez, in a paper called 'Naturalized Sense Data', argues that the *directness* of acquaintance is an epistemic notion orthogonal to the notion of *immediate* awareness, and that the two might come apart. He argues that directness should be understood in terms of the capacity to form demonstrative judgments, just as Snowdon construes it. But, why think that *this* notion is incompatible with robustness if demonstrative reference itself is compatible with actual mediation by a representation?

So, whether we're talking about the weaker notion of apparent immediacy, or whether we're talking about the epistemic notion of directness construed in terms of the capacity for demonstrative thought, we might escape Trogdon's worries about compatibility with robustness. So, perhaps the notion of directness deployed in Trogdon's discussion sets the bar unnecessarily high.

4. Robustness

Since I'm running short on time, I'll summarize my final set of questions and make a suggestion.

The gist of the worry is that, despite what I just said about directness, I am not convinced that failing to satisfy robustness is such a problem for the small class of states or representations that Kelly is discussing. These are particular cases of acquaintance with particular phenomenal characteristics. It might be that such cases of occurrent reflection upon one's experiences, and the demonstrative thoughts about its properties that accompany them, fail to satisfy robustness. Nonetheless, more sophisticated forms of thought about the features of experiences -- such as those that lean on the relations among features in a quality space, or that require recognition and deployment of type-demonstratives -- might still be quite substantive.

However, for the class of states Trogdon has in mind, perhaps we can explain away the impression of robustness by appealing to two other kinds of states or representations. First, experiences themselves are famously robust. They are substantive and they are determinate. Perhaps the occurrent introspective demonstrative thought itself is quite "thin", while it inherits (or appears to inherit) the overwhelming richness of experience simply by association. Second, the rich information required for and embodied in the more sophisticated or intelligent forms of thought about introspectible phenomenological states and properties might add in the ways discussed by Levin and Schroer to the mere impression that representations deployed in states of acquaintance with the phenomenal are substantive and determinate. Such substantive and determinate content may actually accrue only once we acquire the right conceptual capacities thanks to experience and further episodes of reflection.