KNOWLEDGE BY ACQUAINTANCE RECONSIDERED

Augustin RISKA
[St. John’s University, New York]

1. In post-Russellian discussions on the notion of acquaintance, the question of the legitimacy of knowledge by acquaintance occupies a foremost place. The contestants of this issue, from G.E. Moore and C.D. Broad up to R. Chisholm and J. Hintikka, are about equally divided in the matter of the approval or disapproval of the Russellian conception of knowledge by acquaintance, which has its forerunners — it is generally claimed — in Plato, St. Augustine and W. James.

If accepted, what kind of knowledge is this knowledge by acquaintance? Is it expressible in the form of a proposition, or is it, as some of Russell’s remarks would suggest, “propositionless”? Let us explore these two significant questions in an appropriate epistemological frame.

(i) The nonpropositional variant is tied up with the use of relevant epistemic terms, such as “observe,” “perceive,” “see,” “feel,” in sentences like “He observes a cat on the roof.”

(ii) The propositional variant, on the other hand, will be applied in analogy with the sentences of the type “He observes that a cat is on the roof,” where the verb “observe” takes a “that”-clause, a propositional clause, as its grammatical object.1

When referring to acquaintance, this distinction cannot be directly applied to the phrase “is acquainted with” which does not

permit the binding with a "that"-clause. Yet, recognizing the fact that acquaintance conveys certain kinds of knowledge, one may attempt to express this distinction as follows:

(1) "S is acquainted with x" means the same as "S knows x";
(2) "S is acquainted with x" means, among other things, "S knows that x is F".

Here 'S' stands for a subject, person (referred to by a proper name or by an individuating description); 'x' is an individual variable ranging over the objects of a specified universe of discourse; and 'F' is a monadic predicate applicable to these objects (via their names or descriptions). Notice the shift of emphasis from "acquainted" to "knows," so that both (1) and (2) can be taken as possible contextual definitions of the phrase "to be acquainted with." Of course, case (2) allows for various variations which would state an entire family of possible contextual definitions, such as:

(2a) "S knows what x is" (or who x is)
(2b) "S knows how x appears"
(2c) "S knows what x does"

etc.

Interestingly, Russell seemed to prefer our possibility (2a), while at the same time he embraced the case (1) which reduces acquaintance to its nonpropositional variant.² This hybrid conception of Russell has apparently been responsible for many misunderstandings and polemical discussions found in the literature dealing with this topic. In addition, the verb "knows" seems to be in need of clarification, so that one might object that the schemata (1) and (2) try to reduce one obscure epistemic notion to another. An obvious reply is that, even if its meaning is not quite clear, the verb "knows" expresses a fundamental epistemic concept which has been elucidated in numerous philosophical contributions. If the concept of knowledge is being defined by more fundamental epistemic concepts (such as Chisholm's evidence, reasonability, or acceptability),³ then no harm will be done by applying our