

*Knowing and Reading*

Readers can, and often do, reap epistemic benefits from reading, no matter the genre of the text. Reading can provide them with knowledge, understanding, insight, and other epistemic goods. In this chapter and Chapter 2, I unpack this remark that, at this high level of generality, must look like a boring truism. In this chapter, I explore the kinds of knowledge reading may yield; in Chapter 2, I explore the relations between reading and understanding, and I hint at some other epistemic benefits.

Reading can yield knowledge, I said, irrespective of the text's genre: we may acquire knowledge through reading newspaper articles, scientific papers, and historical narratives, as well as through reading poems, novels, and plays. The last part of this statement is controversial, but I will make this claim plausible as we go along. It is fairly standard among epistemologists to distinguish three forms, or kinds, of knowledge (see, e.g., Feldman 2003, 8–23): (1) knowledge of facts, also called knowledge of truths, or propositional knowledge; (2) knowledge by acquaintance, sometimes also called objectual knowledge; and (3) ability knowledge, or know-how. In this chapter I shall argue that reading can afford readers knowledge in each of these categories.

Before starting off, I should like to comment on certain locutions that are sometimes used when the relation between reading and knowledge is at issue, viz., that books *contain* knowledge and that works of literature *embody* knowledge.<sup>1</sup> These locutions suggest that just as there are bottles in which there is wine, there are items “in which” there is knowledge, and these items are books, articles – in one word, *texts*.<sup>2</sup> But how shall we understand this? For the proper subjects of knowledge are persons, not nonpersonal inanimate things such as sticks and stones and, indeed, texts.

<sup>1</sup> The latter locution is used in Gibson (2009).

<sup>2</sup> I use the word *text* as the most general word for what is written.

I suggest that the locution “This book contains knowledge” can be understood in one of two ways:

1. *In or through or by means of* a book, the author communicates things they *know* – not just things they *think* they know, but things they *actually* know.
2. If people read that book, they can – and, if all goes well, they will – acquire the knowledge the writer intended to communicate.

Let us call the former *writer’s knowledge*, the latter *reader’s knowledge*.<sup>3</sup> Writer’s knowledge is not the totality of what an author must know in order to produce her text – it is exclusively the knowledge that she intends to communicate to her readership. It should be clear that what a writer must know in order to be able to produce her text exceeds the knowledge that she intends to communicate. Knowledge of a language, for example, is needed if one is to produce a text, but the writer may have no wish to communicate that knowledge to her readers. Also, knowledge of literary conventions is needed if one is to produce a literary text, but writers mostly don’t intend to communicate their knowledge of those conventions. Writer’s knowledge, then, is knowledge that the writer aims to communicate.

Writer’s knowledge and reader’s knowledge are different things. They can, as I will say, “come together,” but they can also come apart. They come together when a writer wants to communicate some bit of knowledge to her readers, and upon reading what she wrote, readers pick up the knowledge. In such a case, what is known by the writer is in a sense identical to what is known to the reader.<sup>4</sup> We expect or hope this to be the case when students read textbooks or when we attentively read newspaper articles. And if poems and novels contain writer’s knowledge, their – properly educated – reader can acquire the writer’s knowledge, in which case writer’s knowledge and reader’s knowledge come together.

However, writer’s knowledge and reader’s knowledge need not come together; they can, and often will, come apart, at least to some extent. A book may contain knowledge that its reader just doesn’t pick up. Such a person, upon reading, may either form false beliefs or no beliefs at all. If they form false beliefs, we think that they have misunderstood the text

<sup>3</sup> In Chapter 5, reader’s knowledge is called reading knowledge *B* (or  $RK_B$ ), and I offer an analysis of “*S* knows through reading that what text *T* (or its author) says (viz., *p*) is true.”

<sup>4</sup> This leaves the conceptual distinction between writer’s knowledge and reader’s knowledge intact, of course.

(or the writer); if they form no beliefs at all, we think that they either misunderstood the text (or the writer) or paid insufficient attention to the text. The misunderstanding can be due to a variety of causes: inadequate grasp of the language, insufficient knowledge of literary conventions (the reader mistook the scientific paper for science fiction), fatigue, or sheer absentmindedness.

There is a further point here I should like to make, one that in the course of this book will play an important role. Readers may come to know, through reading, things that are *not* part of the writer's knowledge as I have defined it – these things are not part of what the author wanted to communicate through their text, yet they are things that readers may come to know by reading that very text. For instance, by reading the newspaper article quoted in the Introduction, I may come to know that it contains ninety words and four numerals. Or consider the following example. I read a book on musicians who have played on Bob Dylan's albums. All albums are discussed, *Slow Train* included. The author, however, doesn't mention Mark Knopfler, who played a prominent role in giving the album its unique musical texture. I thereby come to know that the author made a mistake, a mistake of omission. That the author made this mistake, however, isn't part of the writer's knowledge (as defined), for obviously the author didn't want to communicate that he made a mistake of omission by not mentioning Mark Knopfler. Yet I came to know this through reading. But now note that although the knowledge I've thus acquired can plausibly be called reader's knowledge, it is not reader's knowledge of the sort I have defined, for reader's knowledge as defined consists in picking up, through reading, what the author knew and intended to communicate. What we have here is another sort of reader's knowledge, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

I now move on to a discussion of the various kinds of knowledge that reading can give rise to, starting with knowledge of facts, or propositional knowledge.

### **Propositional Knowledge through Reading**

I shall discuss two accounts of propositional knowledge – the justified true belief account and Fred Dretske's information-theoretic account – and specify how knowledge acquisition through reading works on both accounts.

Propositional knowledge is knowledge of facts. If you know that the earth has a moon, you know a fact. In general, to know that *p* is to know

the fact that  $p$ . We linguistically represent knowledge of facts with that-clauses, and they, in turn, express propositions about facts. The paradigmatic form of an ascription of that kind of knowledge is “ $S$  knows that  $p$ ,” where  $S$  is a variable for persons and  $p$  for propositions.

Propositions as I shall be thinking of them are nonlinguistic items that can be expressed by linguistic devices, have truth-value, are the objects of propositional attitudes, and stand in logical relations to each other.<sup>5</sup> By way of explanation, the English sentence “The queen is dead,” the Latin sentence “Regina mortua est,” and the Dutch sentence “De koningin is dood” express the same proposition.<sup>6</sup> This proposition, depending on who the queen is, is either true or false, and it can be believed, feared, hoped, or expected – that is, it can be the object of different propositional attitudes. You may believe that the queen is dead, other people may fear that she’s dead, and yet others may hope that she’s dead. Finally, this proposition stands in logical relations to other propositions, such as relations of entailment. It entails, for instance, the proposition that the queen no longer speaks, and it is entailed by the proposition that all royalty is dead.

True propositions are made true by facts. The proposition that the earth has a moon is made true by the fact that the earth has a moon. Propositions and facts are different sorts of items. Propositions have truth-value whereas facts do not. Facts can’t be true or false; rather, facts obtain.

There are somewhat disguised forms of propositional knowledge, viz., various forms of knowing-wh: knowing *when* the match will start, knowing *where* the keys are, knowing *who* pushed the button, and knowing *why* she came. They are cases of propositional knowledge because when you know *when* the match starts, the following situation obtains: there is a true proposition that states the starting time of the match, and you know that proposition. This works similarly for the other examples (see Feldman 2003, 9–12).

One widely discussed account of propositional knowledge is that knowledge is justified true belief: to know that  $p$  is to have a justified true belief that  $p$ .<sup>7</sup> The motivation for the thought that knowledge requires belief is

<sup>5</sup> A defense of this view, sometimes called the mainstream view, is Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009); their defense is pitted against relativists.

<sup>6</sup> As I shall be thinking of it, the sentence “The queen is dead,” used in a particular situation (one in which the queen referred to is Queen Elizabeth), expresses the proposition that Queen Elizabeth is dead, but used in another situation (one in which the queen referred to is Queen Juliana), expresses the proposition that Queen Juliana is dead.

<sup>7</sup> Because of Gettier problems, this analysis is problematic. Still, the wide consensus is that knowledge requires true belief *plus* something; the discussion about what that something is is more or less undecided. See Plantinga (1993b) and Shope (2002). The consensus breaker is Timothy Williamson

that, in order for you to know that  $p$ , the fact that  $p$  must in some way be represented to you, and believing that  $p$  fulfills that representational role. Also, knowledge seems to involve the subject's commitment to  $p$ . This is what G. E. Moore's paradox<sup>8</sup> helps to draw our attention to. When I say "I know that it is raining," I register my commitment to the belief that it's actually raining. That is why the addition "but I don't believe it" seems like a retraction of that commitment, which suggests that the commitment was part of the belief all along. It is a paradox to say "I know that it is raining, but I don't believe it" – hence, knowledge requires belief.

But merely believing that  $p$ , so merely being committed to the truth of  $p$ , is not enough to *know* that  $p$ . If believing  $p$  would be enough for knowing  $p$ , this would have highly objectionable consequences – e.g., by merely *believing* there is extraterrestrial life, you would *know* there is extraterrestrial life, and by merely *believing* you will get safely down the mountain, you would *know* that you will. However, this sounds wrong. You *don't* know these things simply because you believe them. So knowledge requires not mere belief but *true* belief. That is the reason why no one knows – and why no one *can* know – that Santa Fe is the capital of Chile: that proposition is false. It is another Moorean paradox to say "I believe that  $p$ , but  $p$  is false," because when you believe that  $p$ , you represent that  $p$  is true – you are committed to  $p$ 's being true.

Yet, as the account under discussion has it, true belief is still insufficient for knowledge. More is needed, as the following example bears out. If you form, prior to the draw, the true belief that the lottery ticket you bought is a winning ticket, you still don't *know* that your ticket is a winner, for you

(2001), who argues that knowledge is unanalyzable and that belief is *not* conceptually prior to knowledge. One argument he offers against the claim that belief is conceptually prior to knowledge is this: from the fact that some condition  $C$  (say, the presence of a belief) is necessary but insufficient for something to be an  $X$  (say, an instance of knowledge), it cannot be concluded that  $X$  must be analyzed as  $C$  + other conditions. His counterexample is that being colored is a necessary but insufficient condition for being red. And from this it cannot be concluded that being red can be analyzed as being colored + other conditions (Williamson 2001, 3). This argument, however, is unconvincing because the relation between being colored and being red differs importantly from the relation between believing and knowing. This can be brought out by reference to W. E. Johnson's distinction between determinables and determinates: "I propose," Johnson (1964, 174) wrote, "to call such terms as color and shape determinables in relation to such terms as red and circular which will be called determinates." *Colored* is a determinable in relation to *red*, or, conversely, *red* is a determinate in relation to *colored*. But the relation between knowledge and belief is not a determinable–determinate relation. This fact undermines the ground on which Williamson's objection against the conceptual priority of belief over knowledge is based. This, of course, is by no means a refutation of Williamson's knowledge-first epistemology (as it is usually called), but it does suggest that this analogy that he avails himself of is problematic. An illuminating evaluation and critique of Williamson's claim that knowledge is unanalyzable is Cassam (2009, 104–110).

<sup>8</sup> On Moorean paradoxes, see Moore (1993).

have no *reason*, or *ground*, for your belief. Although your belief is true (your ticket *is* a winner), it is true by sheer good luck. You are not *justified* in believing as you do.

There have been many different proposals as to what is required for a belief to be justified.<sup>9</sup> Does it require that the belief is based on evidence? On *sufficient* evidence? Or does it require that the subject has done their epistemic best in gathering and weighing the relevant evidence? Or does it require that the belief is coherent with the rest of the subject's beliefs, or with an appropriate subset thereof, or with the best scientific knowledge that we have? Or does it require that it is formed by a *de facto* reliable belief-forming mechanism – that is, one whose output beliefs are highly likely to be true? Or does knowledge require true belief that is warranted in the technical sense that Plantinga has elaborated, so formed by a reliable mechanism that is functioning properly in an appropriate environment and whose belief outputs have a high likelihood of being true?

I don't propose to enter these discussions here, nor will I enter the debate about so-called Gettier problems.<sup>10</sup> Rather, I will proceed from two assumptions. First, I will assume that knowledge is *almost* justified true belief, for an extra condition is needed. But I won't try my hand at determining exactly what that extra condition is. In the discussions of knowledge that follow, I will often reason as if having a true and justified belief is sufficient for knowledge, and not worry about the extra condition; it should be tacitly understood that the extra but unstated condition is also satisfied. Second, in these discussions I shall assume that what is required for a belief to be justified (in cases in which the belief is yielded by reading or by interpretation) is evidence.

What I suggest is this: even if we are not agreed upon the proper analysis of propositional knowledge, this should not deter us from supposing that we can and do acquire propositional knowledge through perception or

<sup>9</sup> See Alston (2005) for an informed discussion of these proposals.

<sup>10</sup> Many epistemologists have offered proposals about what would be sufficient for knowledge ever since Edmund Gettier argued that even justified true belief is insufficient. Here is a well-known case (a so-called Gettier case), due to Russell, that is often used to show that justified true belief is insufficient for knowledge. The restaurant of the company where Sam has been working for quite some time now has a clock. Sam looks at the clock and sees that it reads twelve o'clock; he forms the belief that it is twelve o'clock, and it is, as a matter of fact, twelve o'clock. So Sam forms a true belief. Sam is, moreover, justified in holding the belief – after all, it is based on his seeing the clock that he knows from experience to be an accurate timekeeper. He thus has a justified true belief. But (let us assume) the clock in fact stopped working twelve hours ago: therefore, Sam cannot be said to *know* that it is twelve o'clock. Sam has a justified true belief, but he doesn't have knowledge. This sort of case suggests that more is needed. For an overview of early discussions of the Gettier problem, see Shope (1983).

reason or memory – or reading. And it doesn't matter to which genre the text belongs: through reading the newspaper, we may come to know that the bee count has been extended; through reading a scientific paper, we may come to know that the emission of CO<sub>2</sub> is higher than ever; through reading Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," we may come to know that the narrator is a heartless and cruel man; through reading the manual of the lawn mower, we may come to know how to lower the blades; through reading the business contract, we may come to know what is required of us; and so on and so forth. No one in their right mind should deny that we can and do acquire propositional knowledge through reading.

Some, as indicated, have qualms about the suggestion that we can acquire propositional knowledge through reading poetry, fictional stories, novels, and dramas. Noncognitivism, as the position is usually called, has its able defenders.<sup>11</sup> Yet it would appear, at least *prima facie*, that through reading a literary work we can come to know, for example,

- what its opening sentence is – e.g., through reading Graham Greene's *This Gun for Hire* (1936) we may come to know that its opening sentences read, "Murder didn't mean much to Raven. It was just a new job";
- what the story line is – e.g., through reading William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) we may come to know that a group of stranded schoolboys under Ralph's leadership developed extraordinarily aggressive behavior toward a red-headed boy named Piggy, whose life, in the end, is saved by a marine officer;
- what the topics or themes in the work are – e.g., a topic in Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751) is the value of the lives of people of lowly origins; a theme in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–1872) is the position of women in society;
- the views of its author – e.g., through reading *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) we may come to know that Thomas Hardy despised the Victorian double standard concerning sexual morality; through reading *Animal Farm* (1949) we may come to know that George Orwell was extremely critical of Soviet Marxism;

<sup>11</sup> Lamarque and Olsen (1994), and Stolnitz (1992). Cognitivism, for a long time the minority position, is gaining traction again. See Graham (2005, 52–75) and Peels (2020), and especially Richard Gaskin's defense of literary humanism, which involves the theses that works of literature make or imply true or false statements about the world and that "some works of literature have cognitive value in the sense that, of the true statements that these works make or imply, some can be known to be true" (Gaskin 2013, 63). My approach in this book puts me in the cognitivist camp.

- general truths – e.g., through reading Aesop’s fable of the fox and the crow (sixth century BCE) we may come to know the very general truth that we should guard ourselves against flattery; and
- facts – e.g., through reading Multatuli’s *Max Havelaar* (1860) we may come to know how, in colonial times, the administrative system in Java worked.

Not everyone will agree with me on these examples. John Gibson’s response to the first three examples is that they can be considered only as cases of *trivial* knowledge (Gibson 2009, 470). Even if that is right (which may be doubted, for what are the standards for triviality here? These standards seem, moreover, heavily context dependent), this is irrelevant to the point I am making, which is that through reading, including works of literature, we can acquire knowledge. We know many things, even if many of the things we know are, in some sense, and in some contexts, trivial. Concerning the other examples on the list, Gibson’s response will conform to his general view that “literary works . . . lacking declarative power . . . are not in the business of articulating truths . . . and thus they cannot be (or do not wish to be) vehicles of the sort of propositional-conceptual knowledge tied to it” (Gibson 2009, 477).<sup>12</sup> This response, however, begs the question, for it seems that the latter three examples *are* cases of knowledge acquisition. Moreover, it just doesn’t seem right to say that literary works lack declarative power. First, it isn’t *works* that make declarations – it is *persons* who do so. Second, persons who are literary authors often do make declarations, and they do so by writing their works: Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, George Elliott, and Multatuli do make – and intend to make – declarations on many different topics, albeit in indirect ways. But if they do, readers can come to know these declarations.

Of course, not everything that is written is true, and, hence, not everything we may come to believe through reading qualifies as knowledge. And of course, even if we come to believe something true through reading, the belief may be ill-founded and have no ground in the evidence that the text provides – it may thus be unjustified and hence not qualify as knowledge. Certain readings, certain interpretations, are unjustified, even

<sup>12</sup> Gibson argues that literature’s goal is not the provision of propositional knowledge about the world but “the expansion and refinement of our understanding of social and cultural reality” (2007, 142). But if – as I shall suggest in Chapter 2 – understanding is propositional, then literature can, after all, give us propositional knowledge of reality. For a very informative critical discussion of noncognitivism, see Gaskin (2013, 118–153).



if they lead to true belief. As said, there is much more to reading literature than mere knowledge acquisition. But none of this should make us doubt the possibility and reality of acquiring propositional knowledge through reading.

To conclude, as a first approximation, on the justified true belief account of knowledge, person *S* comes to know that *p* through reading provided the following conditions are satisfied: (i) *S* forms the belief that *p* as a result of reading; (ii) *p* is true; (iii) *S*'s belief that *p* is justified on the basis of what *S* has read (plus background knowledge). In order for this account to work, conditions (i) and (iii) should be clarified. First, what exactly is it to form a belief as a result of reading? If you're reading and feel that reading makes you sleepy, then you form the belief that you're sleepy as a result of reading – but in this case, the belief doesn't result from reading in the right way. So how should a belief be related to reading in order for it to result from reading in the right way? This question will be explored in detail in Chapter 5. Second, when is *S*'s belief that *p* justified on the basis of what *S* has read? This matter will be explored in detail in Chapters 5, 8, and 9.

Let me now consider how the chips fall when we think about knowledge acquired through reading on Dretske's information account of knowledge. One formulation of this theory is that *S* knows that *p* iff *S*'s belief that *p* is caused (or causally sustained) by the information that *p* (Dretske 1981, 86). This is offered as a characterization of perceptual knowledge. Since reading involves visual perception (for blind people who have mastered braille, reading involves tactile perception), it looks promising to think about reading along Dretske's lines. Now, what is information supposed to be, and how exactly does Dretske construe the relation between information and knowledge?

As to the first question, on Dretske's account, information, or semantic content, is something that can be "carried" by signals. Consider one of Dretske's examples (1981, 21–22):

There are eight mischievous boys and a missing cookie. Who took it? An inspection reveals crumbs on Junior's lips . . . . Any one of the eight boys could have taken the cookie, and any one was as likely to take it as any other one. Hence, Junior's eating the cookie represents a reduction of eight possibilities to one . . . . With some routine assumptions we may suppose that the crumbs on Junior's lips carry information about who ate the cookie.

The crumbs on Junior's lips are a signal that carries the information that Junior took the cookie. A further example is the red spots that Agnes developed on her cheeks: the red spots are signals carrying the information that she suffers from measles. And, finally, in certain conditions a double

knock on the door is a signal, and the information it carries is that the coast is clear (Dretske 1981, 40).

As to the second question, concerning the relation between information and knowledge, Dretske says that “what information a signal carries is what it is capable of ‘telling’ us, telling us truly, about another state of affairs. Roughly speaking, information is that commodity capable of yielding knowledge, and what information a signal carries is what we can learn from it” (1981, 44). He also says that information “is a commodity that, given the right recipient, is capable of yielding knowledge” (1981, 47). These quotations contain various ideas about the relation between information and knowledge. One idea is that information is *capable* of yielding knowledge – i.e., it may or may not yield knowledge in some agent. Thus, when the information does not yield knowledge in anybody (i.e., when no one actually learns something from the information contained in a signal), this doesn’t mean that there is no information. For information to be information, it does not have to yield knowledge in some agent. So, there may be information without knowledge; and although Dretske doesn’t say so explicitly, he is assuming that if there is to be knowledge, there has to be information.

A second idea is that if information is to yield knowledge, there needs to be a “right recipient.” Information isn’t capable of yielding knowledge in just anything or anybody: the recipient must, so to speak, be sensitive to the signal and to the information it contains. A being that lacks the faculty of visual perception cannot pick up the visual signals that carry the information that Agnes has measles.

For what follows it is useful to add that one signal may carry a number of different informational contents – hence, that from one signal, the right recipient may learn several different things. Dretske illustrates the point as follows (1981, 72):

The acoustic signal that tells us someone is at our door carries not only the information that someone is at the door, but also the information that the button is depressed, that electricity is flowing through the doorbell circuit, that the clapper on the doorbell is vibrating, and much else besides. Indeed, all the information that is nested (analytically or nomically) in these states of affairs is also part of the acoustic signal’s informational content.

So Dretske says that signals are the carriers of information and that, given the right recipient, they are capable of yielding knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> As I shall say, the world *contains* or *embodies* information; signals only *carry* information.

Suppose we apply this to reading. Then we may say that texts are signals, or perhaps bundles of signals; they are the carriers of information. Texts carry information even when they are not read (not, at least, by people other than the writer), even if no one actually learns anything from them. But given the right recipients, they *are* capable of yielding knowledge in readers. Right recipients for text signals are properly educated and adequately informed persons – roughly, persons who can read; that is, persons who know the language in which the text is written and who, perhaps, know about style and genre conventions. *Not*-right recipients are sticks and stones, cats and hawks, and humans who, for some reason or other, can't read. Even when people are actually seeing texts and are thus the recipients of signals, they may not learn anything from them if they're unable to decode or interpret the signs. This happens when the text is a Hebrew text and the reader doesn't know Hebrew. This example illustrates that in order to be able to pick up the information that is carried by a text, one needs to have specific knowledge in addition to the knowledge that comes from the text one is reading (in this case, one needs to know Hebrew).

One signal, Dretske says, may carry a number of different informational contents. This clearly also holds when the signals are texts. Texts carry a plethora of informational contents. A text may carry informational content about the text itself (what language it is in, how many words it counts, how its first sentence reads, etc.), about the author (what language they know [if the text is not a translation], what views they hold, which moods they are capable of describing, what they intend to convey to the reader, what their intentions are, etc.), and about the world (for example, that the ice caps are melting, that the moon always shows the same face to the earth, and who won the New York marathon).

Reading, then, can produce knowledge in people. It doesn't matter to what genre the text belongs. And it doesn't matter whether we think about knowledge as a form of true belief or along the lines of Dretske's information-theoretic account.

### Knowledge by Acquaintance through Reading

As Bertrand Russell famously suggested, not all knowledge is propositional, not all knowledge is knowledge of truths.<sup>14</sup> Someone who knows many truths about Burgundy wine doesn't, just in virtue of knowing those

<sup>14</sup> See Russell (1948), chapter 5, which bears the title "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description."

truths, know the taste of a Burgundy. In order to know the taste of a Burgundy, one has to taste it – drinking the wine is the way to get acquainted with its taste. We can have knowledge by acquaintance, then, of tastes; and of colors, too. You may know many truths about colors, but these truths don't give you knowledge by acquaintance of colors. The only way to obtain such knowledge of a particular shade of blue is by visually seeing that shade. This is one of the points Frank Jackson made in his famous paper about what Mary didn't know (Jackson 1986). Mary, so the story goes, is confined to a black-and-white room, and she's educated through black-and-white books and through lectures relayed on a black-and-white television. In this way, she learns everything there is to know about the physical world. Well, not *everything*. For when she is let out of the room, she learns something new – she learns what it is like to see, say, something blue. She gains knowledge by acquaintance of the color blue.<sup>15</sup>

Thought of in this way, knowledge by acquaintance is, as Mark Johnston (2006) has it, “knowledge of what something is like.” To know *X* in this sense is “to know what *X* is like.” To revert to the examples given above: to know the taste of a Burgundy is to know what a Burgundy tastes like (it is to know how it tastes because one has tasted it oneself), and to know the color blue is to know what blue, or a blue thing, looks like (it is to know how blue looks because one has seen blue things oneself). Similarly, to know stomach pain is to know what a pain in the stomach feels like (it is to know how a pain in the stomach feels because one has experienced it oneself); to know happiness is to know what happiness feels like (it is to know how happiness feels because one has been happy oneself).

Thinking about knowledge by acquaintance in this way entails of course that someone who's never drunk a Burgundy doesn't know (in this sense of knowing) the taste of a Burgundy, that a color-blind person doesn't know (in this sense) the color blue, that a man doesn't know (in this sense) what it is like to give birth to a child, and so forth. Knowledge by acquaintance, then, has two features: it is first personal, and it is experiential. This is why I cannot have pain in your head, nor you in mine.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Jackson's knowledge argument (as it is usually called) is standardly taken to show that Mary comes to (propositionally) know new facts – viz., nonphysical facts; and more generalized, the argument is taken to show that, in addition to physical facts, there are nonphysical facts. In the context of the present chapter, my take on the argument is akin to Conee (1994), where it is defended that the argument shows that upon her release, Mary obtains nonpropositional acquaintance knowledge of colors.

<sup>16</sup> We can have knowledge by acquaintance, then, of tastes and colors. It has also been suggested (e.g., by Feldman 2003, 11) that we can have knowledge by acquaintance of persons. We have such

Many acquaintance theorists hold that a what-it-is-like experience is nonconceptual – i.e., that one can have the experience without the involvement of concepts, that the experience doesn't consist in the application of concepts.<sup>17</sup> One can experience the taste of a Burgundy without applying any concept. Also, one can visually experience the color blue without applying the concept *blue* or any other concept. Since acquaintance involves no concepts, it doesn't involve judgments or beliefs either. Knowledge by acquaintance is compatible with forming no beliefs at all.

This is not to deny that there might be a relation between a person's experience of what *X* is like and certain beliefs of that person about *X*. It may very well be, as foundationalists have argued, that one's experience of what *X* is like *justifies* some of one's beliefs about *X* (see, for instance, Fumerton 2001). For example, your experience of blue may justify your belief that what you are seeing is blue as well as your belief that Hester's shoes are blue – at least, if what you are seeing are Hester's shoes. But in order for you to be acquainted with the blueness of Hester's shoes, you don't have to have concepts, nor form beliefs about the shoes' color (even if you typically will have such beliefs).

Knowledge by acquaintance, then, is knowledge that can exist without belief. Thus, the question can be raised whether knowledge by acquaintance really is *knowledge*. It has been argued that it is not, and hence that we should not confuse acquaintance with foundational knowledge of truths acquired (and justified) by acquaintance.<sup>18</sup> I agree that we should not confuse these, but I don't agree that we therefore should refrain from speaking about knowledge by acquaintance. I disagree because long-standing linguistic practice suggests that acquaintance, whether or not it gives rise to propositional knowledge or justified belief, is itself a form of knowledge – albeit of a different nature than propositional knowledge. In the end, however, nothing much hangs on whether we call it knowledge: what is most important is that we recognize the phenomenon.

knowledge of others when we've met them, shook hands with them, talked with them, dined with them, and so on. You may know many truths about Angela Merkel – e.g., that she originates from former East Germany, that her father was a parson, that she has a degree in physics, and that she's become a very influential politician. But unless you have met with her, talked with her, and so on, it would be seriously misleading for you to say "I know Dr. Merkel," even if you know all the truths about her that I mentioned. So there is a sense of *know* in which you don't know a person unless you've met them, viz., the knowledge-by-acquaintance sense. Russell denied that we can have knowledge by acquaintance of persons, but he affirmed that we can have knowledge by acquaintance of universals (Russell 1948, 52).

<sup>17</sup> Nonconceptualism is defended by Dretske (1981), Evans (1982), and Peacocke (1983).

<sup>18</sup> For more on this, see Hasan and Fumerton (2017).

By my counting there are at least four different relations between reading and knowledge by acquaintance conceived of as being first personal, what-it-is-like experiential, and nonconceptual. First, when we read, we have – and *must* have – knowledge by acquaintance of the words and sentences that we’re reading. Just as you cannot smell a rose without being acquainted with its fragrance, so you cannot read a text without being acquainted with its words and sentences. This acquaintance is obviously a first-person experience. Moreover, the experience has a distinctive what-it-is-like quality. What it is like to see words and sentences when reading is very different from what it is like to see a giraffe or a house, and it is even more different from what it is like to hear a drum beat or what it is like to taste a Burgundy. Finally, the first-person experience of seeing words and sentences is nonconceptual: you don’t have to have the concept *word* or the concept *sentence* in order to have knowledge by acquaintance of words and sentences. You can have knowledge by acquaintance of Cyrillic letter forms even when you don’t know the Russian language.

But how exactly should we think about this relation between reading and knowledge by acquaintance of words and sentences? It isn’t that reading *gives rise to* knowledge by acquaintance (in the way reading can and often does give rise to propositional knowledge). Rather, it is, as suggested, that reading a text *requires* that the reader has knowledge by acquaintance of words and sentences. The relation is one of a *precondition*: it is a precondition for reading that the reader has knowledge by acquaintance of words and sentences.

A second type of knowledge by acquaintance that comes with reading, we might say, “builds on” the knowledge by acquaintance just discussed. Acquaintance with words and sentences of the sort just mentioned can go hand in hand with acquaintance with the *meaning* of the words and sentences. You see, for example, the word *woods* in the sentence “Whose woods these are I think I know” and immediately grasp its meaning. This grasping of the meaning of the word *woods*, I suggest, is a second type of knowledge by acquaintance. Your grasping the meaning of the word is a first-person experience: it is you who grasps the meaning, and the grasping, moreover, is experiential in the sense that it has a distinctive qualitative feel to it. What it is like to grasp the meaning of the word *woods* is different from what it is like to grasp the meaning of the word *odd* or the meaning of *perpendicular*.

The what-it-is-like character of grasping word meanings, moreover, is nonconceptual. This may initially seem strange, but I don’t think it is. To say that knowledge by acquaintance of a patch of blue is nonconceptual is

to say that one doesn't need a concept – not the concept *blue* nor the concept *patch* – to be acquainted with that color. Likewise, to say that knowledge by acquaintance of the meaning of the word *woods* is non-conceptual is to say that in order to be acquainted with its meaning one doesn't need (other) concepts. One can be acquainted with the word's meaning without, for example, being able to provide a synonym or a definition for it. Thus, we don't necessarily need concepts in order to have knowledge by acquaintance of word meanings.

I take it that Russell adopted a somewhat similar view when he wrote: "We also have acquaintance with what we shall call *universals*, that is to say, general ideas, such as *whiteness*, *diversity*, *brotherhood*, and so on . . . Awareness of universals is called *conceiving*, and a universal of which we are aware is called a *concept*" (Russell 1948, 51–52). So having a concept, say, the concept *brotherhood*, is identical to being aware of a universal (the universal *brotherhood*), and universals are objects of acquaintance, as are colors, smells, and tastes. There is a difference, though, between Russell's view and the view that I've tried to articulate. On my view we have, or can have, knowledge by acquaintance of word meanings. Now, *some* word meanings are universals: the meaning of the word *brotherhood*, for example, is the universal *brotherhood*. But we're also acquainted with word meanings that are *not* universals – for example, syncategorematic words like *and* and *this* and indexicals like *here* and *now*. On my view, we can have knowledge by acquaintance of the meaning of these words, too.

It bears pointing out that we can also have *propositional* knowledge of word meanings – e.g., knowing that the meaning of *to procrastinate* is "to put things off." But the present point is that we have *acquaintance* knowledge of word meanings.

As to the exact relationship between reading and knowledge by acquaintance of word meanings, we must say that reading doesn't normally<sup>19</sup> *give rise to* knowledge by acquaintance of word meanings but, rather, that reading *requires* it. One isn't reading unless one is acquainted with the meanings of the words one is reading. (This is compatible, of course, with incidental ignorance of the meaning of some of the words one is reading.)

There is a third type of knowledge by acquaintance associated with reading. It builds on the previous two types. Via acquaintance with the words and sentences, and via acquaintance with the word and sentence meanings, when things go well, we can come to know the thoughts of an

<sup>19</sup> "Normally," because it is possible to get acquainted with the meaning of a word by consulting a dictionary.

author; that is, we can come to know what they intended to convey or “get across,” what they wanted to endorse, suggest, criticize, ask, and so on. Through reading a newspaper article, one may come to know the author’s thought that something is terribly wrong in Angola, or that Bob Dylan’s voice sounded surprisingly good at last night’s concert. Knowing that the newspaper article says any of these things isn’t knowledge by acquaintance – it is knowledge of facts. Knowing, on the basis of reading the newspaper, that there is something terribly wrong in Angola or that Dylan’s voice sounded good last night aren’t cases of knowledge by acquaintance either: these cases lack the first-personal and experiential character that marks out knowledge by acquaintance. Yet, as I shall now suggest, even here knowledge by acquaintance is involved. Suppose you read the newspaper and come to think the author’s thought expressed in the article, viz., that there is something terribly wrong in Angola; or suppose you come to think the thought that the reviewer expressed when he wrote that Dylan’s voice sounded surprisingly good. Now, thinking these thoughts is surely a first-personal affair: it is you who’s having the thoughts. There is, moreover, a what-it-is-like aspect to thinking these thoughts: thinking that there is something terribly wrong in Angola has a qualitative aspect that is different from the qualitative aspect that comes with thinking that Dylan’s voice sounded surprisingly good.

The point of saying this is that through reading, we come to think thoughts. Thinking thoughts involves almost always entertaining propositions: whether one, through reading, comes to believe that  $p$ , doubt that  $p$ , hope that  $p$ , fear that  $p$ , or whatever, it always involves having proposition  $p$  in mind. Propositions, if we think of them in a Platonist-realist vein, are abstract objects. And like universals, propositions can be objects of acquaintance: we can have knowledge by acquaintance, for example, of the proposition that there is something terribly wrong in Angola. In thinking that proposition, we have knowledge by acquaintance of it. But my acquaintance with that proposition doesn’t by itself amount to my *knowing that* there is something terribly wrong in Angola. For if that proposition is false, then when I think that thought I lack the propositional knowledge that there is something terribly wrong in Angola – for knowledge is factive. Nevertheless, I have knowledge by acquaintance of that proposition: I know what it is like to think it. Finally, knowledge by acquaintance of propositions is a nonconceptual affair. When I merely entertain a proposition, I don’t need (other) concepts in order to be able to entertain it. I don’t need the concept *proposition*, for example, in order to be able to entertain the proposition that Dylan’s voice sounded good.



So, propositions can be objects of propositional knowledge as well as of knowledge by acquaintance. And it would seem that we can only have propositional knowledge if we also have knowledge by acquaintance of the proposition involved. But knowledge by acquaintance of a proposition is insufficient – though necessary – for propositional knowledge of it.

What exactly is the relation between reading and knowledge by acquaintance of propositions? There's a difference between this type of knowledge by acquaintance and acquaintance with words and word meanings. For reading often does give rise to the kind of knowledge by acquaintance under discussion: it is *through reading* that a reader comes to entertain certain propositions and not others. This type of knowledge by acquaintance is not a precondition for reading – it results from it.

There is, finally, a fourth type of knowledge by acquaintance that comes – or can come – with reading, which I call secondhand knowledge by acquaintance, or proxy acquaintance, for reasons that will emerge in a moment. The reality of proxy acquaintance can perhaps best be illustrated by reference to what happens or may happen when one reads works of literature, especially novels. (But reading other genres – e.g., poems, biographies, autobiographies, and historical narratives – may work the same wonder.) Through reading works of literature one may, to use Dorothy Walsh's phrase, "vicariously live through" (Walsh 1969, 129) an experience or a way of living or a position in life that one has no acquaintance with by one's own experiences. For example, through reading Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), one may have a proxy experience of what it is like for a woman to live in a culture in which what is allowed to men is denied to women. Through reading Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, the Sea* (1978), one may experience what it is like to project one's feelings on someone else while having no idea that one is doing so. Through reading John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), one may come to feel what it is like to shoot someone for whom one has cared deeply. Through reading Marilynne Robinson's *Home* (2008), one may come to feel what it is like for a father to have a son whom he doesn't understand. Through reading Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), one may feel what it is like to belong to a family that falls apart, and what it is like to be attracted to a truly holy man (the starets Zosima). Through reading literature, then, one may have a what-it-is-like experience of something that one has no firsthand experience of.

To be sure, this isn't knowledge by acquaintance in the strict sense, for one doesn't have a first-person experience of the real thing. But it's close enough to qualify as proxy knowledge by acquaintance. There is *some sort*

of first-person what-it-is-like experience that one is undergoing in these cases. The most important reason why proxy acquaintance isn't real acquaintance is that, whereas in the genuine article the experience is nonconceptual, in proxy cases, the experience in the reader is mediated and induced by concepts – you can't have a proxy experience unless you have concepts. And there is a variety of ways in which the feat can be accomplished. For instance, the extreme is when a certain what-it-is-like experience is induced in the reader through various concepts, *none* of which describe the experience. For instance, through reading Marilynne Robinson's first novel, *Housekeeping* (1980), a reader can get a (kind of) what-it-is-like experience of living in a dysfunctional household. But nowhere in the entire novel is the notion *dysfunctional household* explicitly used. As a matter of fact, it takes quite some time for the reader to realize that the household that is being described is dysfunctional. Another example of this extreme is Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea*, in which readers can get a what-it-is-like experience of being deluded by one's own wishful thinking, without the notions *delusion* and *wishful thinking* ever being used in the novel. Many other books, the reading of which can give the reader a proxy acquaintance with something, are at some remove from this extreme in that they do use concepts that more or less directly describe the experience.

What is, precisely, the relation between reading and secondhand knowledge by acquaintance? It is not that proxy acquaintance is a requirement for reading – rather, reading can induce and generate proxy acquaintance.

To sum up, reading requires knowledge by acquaintance of words and sentences; it also requires knowledge by acquaintance of word meanings. Reading can yield, or generate, or give rise to, knowledge by acquaintance of propositions. And reading can induce and generate proxy knowledge by acquaintance of, for example, experiences. Beings incapable of the first three types of knowledge by acquaintance cannot read. (Hence acquaintance is included in the analysis of reading that I offer in Chapter 5.) Beings incapable of proxy acquaintance miss out on important cognitive gains involving empathy (for this, see Keen 2007).

### **Knowing-How through Reading**

Epistemologists often distinguish a third form of knowledge, viz., knowing-how, knowing how to *do* something – for instance, knowing how to play the guitar, how to play “Stairway to Heaven,” how to speak Dutch, how to pronounce the sentence “Een schelle schicht schoot

schichtig uit den hogen,” or how to cook a gourmet dish. Gilbert Ryle argued that knowledge-how cannot be reduced to knowledge-that – i.e., propositional knowledge – and that those who think such a reduction *is* possible are in the grips of “the intellectualist legend,” according to which intelligent actions must be preceded by the intellectual acknowledgment of rules or criteria (Ryle 1949, 27ff.). He concedes that sometimes this is the case; for instance, when a chess player takes some time to plan their moves before they make them. He points out, however, that there are many things we know how to do without prior acknowledgment of criteria or rules: for example, someone may know how to make good jokes and how to detect bad ones without having a recipe available to themselves, and people can reason correctly even if they don’t make an internal reference to the rules of reasoning.

Adam Carter and Ted Poston (2018) have recently advanced a new argument for the irreducibility of knowing-how to knowing-that. The argument is that, whereas knowing-that can easily be transmitted by testimony, knowing-how cannot. The argument proceeds from considering inferences about knowledge transmission like the following:

- (A) (1) Rutger knows that Robert Schumann wrote *Kinderszenen*; (2) Rutger tells Sophie that Schumann wrote *Kinderszenen*; (3) so, Sophie knows that Schumann wrote *Kinderszenen*.
- (B) (1) Rutger knows how to play Schumann’s *Kinderszenen*; (2) Rutger tells Sophie how to play Schumann’s *Kinderszenen*; (3) so, Sophie knows how to play Schumann’s *Kinderszenen*.

It seems obvious that (A) looks good and (B) bad. From inferences like these, Carter and Poston draw the general conclusion that knowing-how cannot be easily transmitted by testimony, whereas propositional knowledge can. This evidences that knowing-how cannot be reduced to knowing-that.

If this line of reasoning is correct, this rather obviously suggests that knowing-how cannot easily be transmitted by reading either. Consider the following inferences:

- (B\*) (1) Rutger knows how to play Schumann’s *Kinderszenen*; (2) Sophie has read what Rutger wrote about how to play *Kinderszenen*; (3) so, Sophie knows how to play *Kinderszenen*.
- (C) (1) Ludmila Pagliero wrote about how to do a pirouette; (2) I have read Pagliero on how to do a pirouette; (3) so, I know how to do a pirouette.

These are bad inferences.

However, the claim that knowing-how cannot easily be transmitted through telling – or, more relevant in the current context, through reading – is unconvincing, because it faces many counterexamples. We read cookbooks so as to acquire knowledge about how to prepare certain dishes. We read books about gardening to come to know how to tend roses or how to prune an elm tree. We read self-help books to overcome anxieties. We read travel guidebooks to find out how to walk from Barcelona's Jewish Quarter to the Sagrada Familia. We read instructions in order to learn how to calculate sales taxes. And by reading the relevant manuals, we come to know how to use our new computer, sewing machine, central heating system, Spotify, and so on.

The claim, then, that know-how cannot easily be transmitted through testimony or reading is false: in fact, know-how transmission is often quite easy. The problem with the discussion on know-how, as Stephen Grimm (2020) has pointed out, is that it has suffered from a one-sided diet of examples. If we expand the diet, the picture becomes more complex, but also more interesting, for whether or not know-how can be transmitted through reading depends then on two factors, viz., the complexity of the know-how and the abilities of the reader, as I will now explain. If the know-how is involved and complex (as in knowing how to play Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, or how to make a pirouette, or how to operate an aircraft, or how to calculate a nation's gross national product), then transmission through reading is much more difficult than if the know-how is simple and easy (as in knowing how to flip the light switch, or how to inflate the tires of your bicycle). It also depends on the abilities of the reader – not only their reading abilities but their other abilities as well. If you're a well-trained pilot, picking up through reading the know-how of operating a new type of equipment will be much easier than if you're a novice in the world of aviation. So, how easy or difficult the uptake of know-how through reading is depends on both the complexity of the information and the reader's abilities.

As Grimm has rightly noted, contrary to what Carter and Poster aver, there is no serious difference in this respect with the transmission of propositional knowledge. It just isn't the case that the transmission of knowing-that through reading, for instance, is always easy. If you barely know French, then even reading an easy French sentence expressing a simple truth will not transmit that truth. And even if you have mastery of the language, the transmission of truths through reading in the areas of, for instance, quantum mechanics, the EU system of taxes and subsidies, or

McTaggart's arguments for the unreality of time and space may be very difficult. Again, whether the uptake of knowledge-that is easy or difficult depends on two factors, viz., the complexity of the proposition(s) involved and the reader's abilities, linguistic and other. These abilities have at least in some part to do with how much the reader already knows about a particular subject matter. If you're a well-educated physicist, the transmission of truths in the area of quantum mechanics will be easier than if you're a biologist or a historian or someone with elementary education only.

The discussion so far leaves it unresolved whether know-how can be reduced to propositional knowledge. For present purposes, there is no need to take a stand on this. The upshot of the discussion in this section is that *it is possible* to acquire know-how through reading, and that the reality of knowledge transmission depends on both the complexity of the know-how and the reader's receptiveness – receptiveness that is due to education, training, and experience. This conclusion stands, regardless of whether knowing-how can be reduced to knowing-that.

The conclusion of this chapter, then, is that reading can give a rich cognitive yield. It can give readers propositional knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance, and know-how. But reading not only yields knowledge – it also requires knowledge, especially knowledge by acquaintance of words, sentences, meanings, and propositions.

In the next chapter, I argue that the cognitive yield of reading is even more capacious.