Perception and Its Objects
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To Anna
Acknowledgements

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The photograph on the front cover is ‘Boat on Water’ from the Folded Paper series by Tansy Spinks. I would like to thank her for permission to use the image in this way. I argue in the book that our perception of the physical world consists most fundamentally in our standing in relations of conscious acquaintance from a given point of view with its persisting mind-independent constituent objects, like the paper boat pictured here. The cover of my previous book showed Tansy’s photograph of an unfolded origami boat; and the book concerned our capacity to integrate different points of view over different circumstances of perception. In this book I give what I now regard as correct priority to our basic perceptual experiential relation with unified physical objects themselves. This is mirrored in the two front covers.

Many thanks also to Andrew Parker who took and helped select my photograph to appear on the dust jacket.

I sent my draft manuscript to Peter Momtchiloff at OUP in the week before I married Anna Wormleighton and the book is dedicated to Anna Brewer with love.

\[1\] Millennium Images Picture Gallery.
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Introduction

The history of the philosophy of perception in my view brings out a serious tension between two absolutely compelling ideas. First, the physical objects that we perceive are the very objects that are presented to us in our conscious perceptual experience. Second, those same physical objects are also mind-independent in the sense of being in their nature entirely independent of any perceptual experience or appearance of them. Of course these ideas are extremely roughly formulated as they stand; but it is already possible to see two extreme reactions. First, Berkeley (1975a, 1975b) and subsequent anti-realisists argue that proper respect for the first idea simply rules out the second, although many of the features of our commonsense world-view that we may take to be indicative of the mind-independence of its constituent physical objects are nevertheless perfectly compatible with the resultant position. Second, realistically oriented philosophers under the influence of Descartes (1986) and Locke (1975) insist that various constraints upon physical objects implicit in the second idea entail significant indirectness at best in the implementation of the first.

Current philosophical orthodoxy has it that the tension is to be resolved instead by a kind of assimilation of perception to thought: perception involves representational contents that make direct reference to mind-independent physical objects. I believe that this response as it stands is unsatisfactory. Just as certain early modern empiricists notoriously face problems as a result of the way in which their theory of ideas seeks to assimilate thought and belief to perception, I contend that the reverse assimilation of orthodox modern philosophy of perception faces serious difficulties in truly accommodating the datum that we are consciously presented in perceptual experience with the physical objects themselves that we perceive.

I propose, develop, and defend an account of perceptual experience that is far more in keeping with what I regard as the early modern empiricist insight that such experience consists most fundamentally in a relation of conscious acquaintance with particular direct objects but insists as against
the early moderns that these direct objects are mind-independent physical objects themselves.

The discussion throughout is organized around the Inconsistent Triad of claims set out in ch. 1 that I think captures the core tension between the two compelling ideas about perception and its objects that I began with. I also outline towards the end of ch. 1 the main contents of subsequent chapters.

Taking a somewhat broader perspective in what remains of this introduction for the purposes of a more informal orientation, the book is an extended reflection upon the nature of our perceptual relation with the mind-independent physical world.

Intuitively this relation is the source of our knowledge and understanding of the nature of the physical world itself. It provides us with at least our provisional conception of what mind-independent physical objects are that makes thoughts about specific such things possible and contributes to our most basic knowledge about them. This is possible because physical objects themselves are *subjectively presented* in our perceptual experience of them: the subjective experiential condition of standing in a perceptual relation with various objects in the world around us is *evidently* dependent upon the nature of those very objects themselves. Their nature is in this way *displayed* in perception. Given their mind-independence, though, there is plenty of scope for error in perception too. Perceptions may be misleading in various ways, things may look to be ways that they are not, and even complete hallucination is at least in principle possible. This suggests the need for a significant degree of complexity in the nature of the perceptual relation itself that may appear to threaten its intuitive status as a subjective presentation of mind-independent physical objects that provides us directly with a genuine conception of their nature. The challenge that I set myself here is to accommodate the required complexity without in any way undermining the initial intuition.

The solution that I offer and elaborate in chs. 5–7 is really quite straightforward. Our basic perceptual relation with the physical world is *just that*. Perception is a matter of our standing in relations of conscious acquaintance from a given spatiotemporal point of view, in a particular sense modality, and in certain specific circumstances of perception, with particular mind-independent physical objects themselves. The ways that things look, for example, in such perceptual experiences are precisely the ways that those very *things* look from that point of view and in the
circumstances in question. That is to say, very roughly, their looks are
grounded in their visually relevant similarities from that point of view and
in those circumstances with the paradigms of various kinds of physical
objects that play a central role in our understanding of the terms in which
such looks are to be characterized. Thus, the ways things are for the subject
in perception are certain of the ways that the objects of perception are
from the subject’s point of view. Of course this thumbnail sketch raises far
more questions than it answers at this stage. My task in what follows is to
provide answers to at least the most pressing such questions in the context
of providing a successful motivation for and defence of the view. The
upshot, I contend, is a satisfying vindication of our initial intuitive empirical
realist conviction.
1 The Inconsistent Triad

Suppose that we identify physical objects, in the first instance, by extension, as things like stones, tables, trees, and animals: the persisting macroscopic constituents of the world that we live in. Of course, there is a substantive question of what it is to be like such things in the way relevant to categorization as a physical object. So this can hardly be the final word on the matter. Still, it is equally clear that this gives us all a perfectly respectable initial conception of what we are talking about; and it is an entirely adequate starting point for what follows.

It is without doubt our commonsense starting point that

(I) Physical objects are mind-independent.

Explication of the mind-independence involved here is a substantive matter in its own right, and the subject of extended discussion in what follows.¹ Still, the core idea is that entities of a given kind are mind-independent if and only if they are constituents of the world ‘as it is in itself’, rather than being in any way dependent in their nature upon the way things do or might appear to anyone in experience of or thought about the world: the nature of such things is entirely independent of their appearance.² Entities are mind-dependent if and only if they are not mind-independent. Thus, their nature is to some extent dependent upon their appearance. I mean by the nature of the entities of a given kind the most

¹ See especially chs. 3 and 7 where I offer and defend criteria for mind-dependence and mind-independence derived from reflection upon a familiar model of the distinction between the primary and secondary qualities.

² The formulation is awkward here. My own view is that the ways that mind-independent physical objects look and otherwise perceptually appear just are a matter of certain of the ways that those very things are. Still, their being those ways is not itself a matter of their appearing any way to anyone. This latter is the sense in which I claim that mind-independence is independence in nature from any appearance. See chs. 3, 5, and 7 below for further development of these issues.
fundamental answer to the question of what such things are. This is also of course a contentious notion. I take it for granted here without argument at this stage and without committing myself to any specific philosophical elaboration. The justification I offer for doing so rests on the merits of what follows within this framework.\(^3\)

The commonsense starting point expressed by (I), then, is simply the conviction that the natures of such things as stones, tables, trees, and animals themselves are independent of the ways in which such physical objects do or may appear in anyone’s experience of or thought about the world. I call the thesis that the objects of a given domain are mind-independent in this sense, *realism* about that domain. (I) is therefore an expression of realism about physical objects, which I call *physical realism*, for short.

Something else that we take for granted is that physical objects are the very things that are *presented* to us in perception. It is extremely difficult to make this very natural idea precise. Indeed, a great deal of what follows effectively concerns various fundamental controversies concerning the notion of perceptual presentation. Still, I reserve the term throughout to express the utterly uncontested sense in which we *see* and otherwise consciously perceive physical objects: they are in this sense elements of perceptual consciousness. This claim that physical objects are presented to us in perception is intended as prior, and uncommitted, to any specific controversial theoretical elucidation of what such perceptual presentation consists in.

Thus, it seems to me to be a fundamental commitment of commonsense in the area that physical objects are both presented to us in perceptual experience and have a nature that is entirely independent of how they do or might appear to anyone. That is, the very objects that are presented to us in perceptual experience are mind-independent. I call this thesis

\(^3\) For a helpful and sympathetic historically informed elucidation of this notion of an object’s nature, see Wiggins (1995). For a highly influential further development of his own position, see Wiggins (2001). Charles (2000) elaborates the Aristotelian source of these ideas with great force and illumination. Strawson (1959) contains important motivation for the modern relevance of the notion. Ayers (1993: ii, esp. parts I and III) offers an alternative development to Wiggins that focuses more directly on the idea of the nature of physical objects in general as causally integrated, enduring, and spatially extended material unities. Although I intend to remain neutral on this here, I am myself more persuaded by Ayers’ position. See also Campbell (2002b: esp. ch. 4).
empirical realism. It is realism about the domain of objects that are presented to us in perception.

Now, according to the early modern empiricists, especially for my purposes Locke (1975) and Berkeley (1975a, 1975b), the nature of conscious experience in general is to be elucidated by reference to certain entities that are set before the mind in such experience. Thus, the most fundamental characterization of a specific perceptual experience is to be given by citing, and/or describing, specific such entities: the experience in question is one of encountering just those things. The notion of a most fundamental characterization of the nature of perceptual experience in general and of specific perceptual experiences in particular here is clearly crucial. Although a good deal of what follows is intended directly or indirectly to elaborate that very notion, it is sufficient for the moment to regard this as the most fruitful and comprehensive characterization of perceptual experience for the purposes of our overall theoretical understanding of such experience in the philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and epistemology of perception. I call those entities, if any, which provide the most fundamental characterization of the nature of perceptual experience in this way its direct objects. These identify any given perceptual experience as the specific modification of the subject’s conscious mental life that it is.

So the early modern empiricist picture is this. In conscious experience, a person is related to certain entities. They are set before her mind, and their being so constitutes her being in just that conscious mental condition. The basic phenomena of consciousness are therefore relational: S is conscious of e. The identity and nature of such entities serves to characterize what it is for the subject to be so conscious. Given this general approach, the entities to which a person is related in this way in perceptual experience are its direct objects. Hence what it is for a person to have a given perceptual experience is canonically to be elucidated by citing, and/or describing, such direct objects. Throughout my discussion, I use the notion of a direct object of perception in precisely this way, as an object, if any, that plays this early modern empiricist role in the fundamental characterization of perceptual experience. I also use the term acquaintance, and its cognates, for the relation in which a person stands to the direct objects of her experience according to the early modern approach. The core idea, then, is that the most fundamental nature of perceptual experience is acquaintance with direct objects.
I am absolutely not committing myself at this stage to this early modern empiricist approach to the nature of perceptual experience, other than as part of the framework for setting up the problem that I wish to discuss. An important and influential response to that problem is precisely to reject the early modern framework involved in posing it as I do. I discuss this response at length in ch. 4 below. Still, I do myself believe that the best solution to my problem retains the core commitment of the early modern empiricists to the idea that perceptual experience is most fundamentally to be characterized as conscious acquaintance with certain direct objects. I elaborate and defend my own development of this approach in chs. 5–7. It is worth baldly stating right from the start, though, what strikes me as its intuitive basis.

Consider the case of vision. An account of the nature of our perceptual experience is an account of the ways things are for us visually speaking, that is, an account of the ways things look. The early modern empiricist insight, as I see it, is to take this way of putting the problem at face value in starting to give a solution. Very crudely, the ways things look are the ways things look. Very slightly less crudely, the ways things look to us in vision are the ways certain specific things look that are presented to us in vision, given the circumstances of their particular presentation. This provides the most fundamental characterization of the nature of the visual experience in question. So the intuitive starting point is to take seriously what might at first sight appear to be a dummy variable, ‘things’, in the question ‘how do things look?’ In vision, there are certain specific things before us, and the way things are for us visually speaking is a matter of the way that those specific things look, given the relevant features of our particular perspective upon them. The most philosophically illuminating framework for understanding the nature of visual perceptual experience is therefore to regard this most fundamentally as a matter of our acquaintance with certain specific direct objects whose nature in turn determines the way that things look to us given the relevant circumstances of our acquaintance with them. This is certainly not intended as an argument for a precisely determinate philosophical position, and opponents of the early modern

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4 I concentrate throughout on the case of vision. I believe that much of what I say applies equally to the other modalities, and occasionally indicate how these may be accommodated within the general framework here, although any such generalization clearly raises many substantive issues that I do not address explicitly in this book.
empiricist approach may no doubt go along with some or all of this intuitive line of thought. I simply offer it as an articulation of what certainly strikes me as a natural inclination to characterize perceptual experience as our acquaintance with certain specific direct objects. I hope that further justification for my strategic choice to set up the problem to be addressed throughout the book on the basis of my introduction of the early modern empiricist approach will be derived from the philosophical illumination offered by the taxonomy of views induced by this formulation of the problem.

Before proceeding to that, though, it may be helpful to make explicit a couple of points about the relation between the early modern empiricist notion of a direct object of perception and other notions sometimes put in similar terms. First, the conception of a direct object adopted here is perfectly compatible with two other approaches to delineating ‘direct objects’ of perception: (a) as those objects about which the perception in question places a person in a position to acquire non-inferential knowledge; and (b) as those objects to which the perception in question places a person in a position to make demonstrative reference. Second, a very popular contemporary approach to the nature of our perceptual relation with the physical world has absolutely no role for direct objects of perception in the technical sense invoked here, although it does insist on another prima facie legitimate sense in which we nevertheless do in appropriate circumstances perceive the mind-independent physical objects around us ‘directly’, without problematic metaphysical or epistemological mediation. I turn directly to views along these lines that reject the very existence of direct objects as I understand them here in ch. 4 below.

5 For (a), see Snowdon (1992), Huemer (2001), McDowell (2008b), and Wright (2008). For (b) see Snowdon (1992). My own view is that it is precisely the fact that certain entities are the direct objects of perception in the technical sense that I derive here from the early modern empiricists that they may be ‘direct objects’ in senses (a) and (b). See ch. 6 for more on the epistemological consequences of my own approach in connection with (a). See Campbell (2002b) for a detailed discussion of the role of a relational conception of perceptual acquaintance in grounding demonstrative thought along the lines suggested by (b). See Brewer (1999) for the idea that the epistemological and thought-theoretic roles of perceptual experience are themselves fundamentally related, which is also of course a prominent early modern empiricist theme: perceptual experience is essential for both our grasp of the most basic empirical concepts and our acquisition of the most basic empirical knowledge.