

***PERCEPTION AND ITS
OBJECTS***

BILL BREWER

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.¹ 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.

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 Millenium 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-realists 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 direct 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.