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# Epistemology

There is a sense in which it is right to say that mind-independent physical objects are given to a person in perception according to (OV): the fundamental fact of perception is our conscious acquaintance with such things from a given spatiotemporal point of view, in a particular sensory modality and in specific circumstances of perception; and this is intended to play a crucial role in the explanation of how empirical knowledge is possible. Yet at least since Sellars (1997), this whole idea of an empirical given in perception has been viewed with great suspicion. So I begin my discussion of the epistemological commitments and ambitions of (OV) by indicating (in § 6.1) how Sellars' initial objection is to be avoided. I then give an extended sketch (in § 6.2) of how the positive epistemology of empirical knowledge might proceed in the context of (OV), illustrating at various points (in § 6.3) how further objections motivated at least in part by Sellars' discussion may be handled. I move on (in § 6.4) to a brief comparison between this (OV)-based epistemological outlook and my own earlier views (Brewer, 1999). The section ends with a return to the topic of transparency that I raised briefly in the introduction to ch. 4 above. The epistemology of perception is of course a major topic and I acknowledge explicitly that what follows really is a sketch of the direction in which I believe that it should be pursued according to (OV) rather than any kind of comprehensive treatment of the issues raised.

### 6.1 The Myth of the Given

Like early modern empiricists, and indeed the sense-datum theorists of the first half of the twentieth century that are Sellars' own more direct target,<sup>1</sup> (OV) construes perceptual experience most fundamentally as a relation to particulars. In contrast with those earlier views, the particulars in the case of (OV) are mind-independent physical objects themselves. Again, like the early modern empiricists and sense-datum theorists, though, (OV) regards this basic experiential relation of acquaintance with certain particulars as of significance in explaining our possession of empirical knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

One way to secure this epistemic result, or at least to make a move towards it, is to analyse acquaintance in explicitly epistemic terms. It may be said, for example, that a person is acquainted with an object o just if there is some property 'F' (perhaps from an appropriately circumscribed range) such that she non-inferentially knows that o is F. Indeed, the weaker claim that acquaintance entails such knowledge would suffice to get the epistemic story going. The remainder of the explanation then of course depends upon the proposed relations between such direct objects of acquaintance and the physical objects of empirical knowledge themselves, and upon the way in which

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Russell (2001), Broad (1925), Price (1950), Ayer (1956, 1963) and Moore (1963), although not all of these authors endorsed the position without qualification themselves. For important modern variants of the sense-datum view see Jackson (1977), Robinson (1994), Foster (2000) and O'Shaughnessy (2003).

<sup>2</sup> For continuity within my own discussion I use 'acquaintance' and its cognates for our basic experiential relation with the direct objects of perception, although I mean it to apply quite generally here in connection with all the views considered. Sellars chooses to use the terminology of 'sensing' and 'sense content' for its relatum. I adopt his own terminology in the extended quotation to follow.

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knowledge of the former is supposed to provide a basis for knowledge of the latter; and this is all itself notoriously problematic (Brewer, 1999, 4.2, esp. 4.2.4-4.2.6). In any case, this whole approach is in tension with another feature of the positions to that constitute Sellars' target.

For they have taken givenness [acquaintance with a given direct object in my terms] to be a fact which presupposes no learning, no forming of associations, no setting up of stimulus-response connections. In short, they have tended to equate sensing sense contents with being conscious, as a person who has been hit on the head is not conscious whereas a new born babe, alive and kicking, is conscious. (Sellars, 1997, p. 20)

Only so, the thought must be, could givenness possibly constitute the unproblematic start of the epistemological explanation.

In a somewhat similar spirit, the whole point of (OV) is to insist upon conscious acquaintance as a fundamental perceptual relation between subjects and mind-independent physical objects from a given point of view, in a particular sensory modality and in specific circumstances of perception, that is more basic than any relation with facts, propositions or contents concerning the particular physical objects in question, and that is therefore more basic than any epistemic relation with such things.

In the light of these reflections, Sellars suggests that all such views are "confronted by an inconsistent triad made up of the following three propositions (1997, pp. 20-1):

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- A. X senses red sense content s entails x non-inferentially knows that s is red.
- B. The ability to sense sense contents is unacquired.
- C. The ability to know facts of the form x is  $\phi$  is acquired.

A and B together entail not-C; B and C entail not-A; A and C entail not-B.

Once the classical sense-datum theorist [or indeed the proponent of (OV)] faces up to the fact that A, B, and C do form an inconsistent triad, which of them will he choose to abandon?

- 1) He can abandon A, in which case the sensing of sense contents becomes a noncognitive fact – a noncognitive fact, to be sure which may be a necessary condition, even a logically necessary condition, of non-inferential knowledge, but a fact, nevertheless, which cannot constitute this knowledge.
- 2) He can abandon B, in which case he must pay the price of cutting off the concept of a sense datum from its connection with our ordinary talk about sensations, feelings, afterimages, tickles and itches, etc., which are usually thought by sense-datum theorists to be its common sense counterparts.
- 3) But to abandon C is to do violence to the predominantly nominalistic proclivities of the empiricist tradition.

The proponent of (OV) clearly rejects A. Conscious acquaintance with mind-independent physical objects is more fundamental than perceptual knowledge in precisely this sense. For, as I explain below, visually-based perceptual knowledge that o is F depends upon o thickly looking F; and it is possible as we have seen repeatedly in ch. 5 above to be consciously acquainted with a mind-independent physical object

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o that is F and yet it not thickly look F for a variety of different reasons.<sup>3</sup> Hence, for any property 'F' of a mind-independent physical object, o, it is possible to be visually acquainted with o and yet not have visually-based perceptual knowledge that o is F. This is part of the point of the (OV) mantra that conscious acquaintance is the fundamental perceptual relation between subjects and mind-independent physical objects from a given point of view, in a particular sensory modality and in specific circumstances of perception, that is more basic than any relation with facts, propositions or contents concerning the physical objects in question, and which is therefore more basic than any epistemic relation with such things.

Of course this rejection of A constrains the kind of explanation that is available to (OV) of perceptual knowledge. It cannot be assumed that our perceptual acquaintance with mind-independent physical objects in and of itself constitutes a foundational level of knowledge about such things. The account that I offer makes no such assumption. Its purpose is to explicate the commonsense commitment that perception of the physical objects in the world around us is, in the context of further additional conditions, a source of knowledge about those very things.

I argue in ch. 7 below that there is an important sense in which B is also contentious according to my own development of (OV). The core idea at the heart of (OV) is that mind-independent physical objects themselves are the direct objects of perception in the early modern sense that I have been adopting throughout. Perceptual experience is most fundamentally to be characterized, as the specific conscious condition that it is, as conscious acquaintance, from a point of view, in a particular sense modality and in

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<sup>3</sup> See also 6.3 below for a fuller treatment of the various possibilities here.

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certain circumstances, with specific mind-independent physical objects. The nature of the experience itself is to be elucidated by reference to those very things that are presented in perception. I argue in ch. 7 that the mind-independence of the physical objects that constitute the direct objects of perception in this way according to (OV), shows up from our own perspective as perceivers in our commitment to certain commonsense-physical explanations of the actual and counterfactual order and nature of our perceptual experience on the basis of the perceptible natures of the very mind-independent physical objects that we perceive. And this is an essential part of what holds in place the (OV) identification of those very mind-independent physical objects themselves as the direct objects of our perception in the first place. Thus, our acquaintance determinately with precisely those direct objects in perceptual experience is in part secured by patterns of explanation that are acquired in the course of our developing engagement with the mind-independent physical world around us. In this sense, then, my own elaboration of (OV) questions B above.

At the same time, there is something right in B too. For (OV) insists that a person's acquaintance with a particular mind-independent physical object, o, in a given perceptual experience on any specific occasion is not dependent upon his actual categorization of that very thing in any acquired manner whatsoever. I explain below how the (OV) account of the role of perceptual experience in our possession of empirical knowledge squares with these commitments concerning B.

(OV) straightforwardly endorses C. Factual knowledge depends upon possession of the concepts employed in the propositional articulation of that knowledge; and we

acquire such concepts again precisely through our developing cognitive engagement with the physical world in which we live.

(OV) is therefore entirely immune to the accusation of inconsistency that Sellars levels at proponents of a given in perception on the basis of various theorists' apparent commitment to A, B and C above.

## 6.2 Empirical Knowledge

The next and most important task is to outline the positive explanation that I propose on behalf of (OV) as to how perceptual experience conceived as acquaintance with mind-independent physical objects constitutes a source of empirical knowledge.

Suppose that o is F, for an appropriate 'F' that can be known on the basis of vision, say. Thus, given what 'F' means, o makes application of 'F' correct: o itself is what makes 'o is F' true and in this sense constitutes a reason to apply the predicate.<sup>4</sup> The crux of the epistemological account that I propose on behalf of (OV) is that conscious acquaintance with o in vision, say, therefore normally makes application of 'F' in judgement evidently correct for a subject who grasps the concept 'F' and is viewing o from a point of view and in circumstances that enable her registration of the appropriate visually relevant similarities between o and the paradigm exemplars of F

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<sup>4</sup> I would say myself that this truth consists in the fact that o resembles the F things; and this is how o makes 'o is F' true. See Rodriguez-Pereyra (2002, 2008) for elaboration of the form of resemblance nominalism that I personally favour. I am uncertain, and I think that this is a very interesting and delicate issue, of the extent to which such nominalism provides further motivation for my development of (OV), or whether my overall case for (OV) instead provides support for resemblance nominalism as a metaphysical account of the physical world that we perceive. I would certainly say that the two are made for each other.

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that are central to her understanding of that concept.<sup>5</sup> In this way, seeing o constitutes the subject's reason for judging that o is F. This, I contend, explains the contribution of perceptual experience to perceptual knowledge: experience acquaints us with the grounds for empirical truth.

In developing this central idea to begin with, I focus on the most basic case of perception from a relatively canonical point of view and in relatively standard circumstances. Illusory judgement and other kinds of perceptual error and epistemic failing are deviations from this basic case that are in my view to be handled separately and derivatively, as I indicate briefly below.

The fact that o thinly looks F as I explain above makes the predication of 'F' appropriate given what 'F' means. For o is presented in experience and has visually

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<sup>5</sup> See Johnston (2006) for a somewhat different development of a similar core claim. As he puts it, "What is distinctive about non-hallucinatory and non-illusory sensory experience is that it presents the truthmakers for the propositions that we immediately judge true on the basis of sensory experience" (pp. 278-9). There are very important differences between our views, though. To begin with, his conception of the relevant truthmakers is significantly broader than mine of the direct objects of perceptual acquaintance. In particular, his involve metaphysical correlates of the determinate predications that I regard as the product of our noticing certain similarities between presented mind-independent physical objects and paradigms of various kinds of such things. In the veridical case, therefore, we are acquainted not only with the object perceived but also with certain of its specific properties. In illusion, we are again acquainted with a particular mind-independent object; but here this is conjoined with acquaintance with an uninstantiated complex of properties corresponding with the ways that the object illusorily appears. An immediate difficulty for the resultant position in my view is the consequent disanalogy in the ways in which it is supposed to be the presented object itself that appears thus and so in both veridical perception and illusion. In the former case, this is due to the fact that the properties presented are actually instantiated by that very object. This is precisely not so in the latter case of illusion. The situation here is in certain respects structurally similar to that of (CV) in connection with veridical vs. illusory experiences as discussed in ch. 4 above and I contend that Johnson faces somewhat similar problems as a result in accounting for the limits upon the nature and extent of error that is compatible with genuine perceptual presentation.



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relevant similarities with various paradigm exemplars of F. The fact that o thickly looks F involves precisely the subject's conceptual registration of these relevant similarities, regardless of whether or not the concept 'F' is actually applied in judgement. If it is, then this application of 'F' is evidently warranted by o itself. If it is not, for whatever reason, then the subject at least appreciates that o looks F. In a slogan: acquaintance in perception provides the evident ground for concept application in judgement. Thus, in appropriate circumstances, perceptual judgement amounts to empirical knowledge.

To elaborate this account I clarify both what perceptual acquaintance contributes to the acquisition of empirical knowledge; and what more must be conjoined with it for this to succeed.

First, when S is presented in perception with a mind-independent object, o, that is F, from a relatively canonical point of view and in relatively standard circumstances, then the fundamental nature of her experience is conscious visual acquaintance, say, with that very object, o, which itself constitutes the ground for an application of the concept 'F' in judgement. O itself is the reason that 'o is F' is true given what 'F' means; and her experience is a matter of being visually conscious of that very thing, o, from a given point of view and in certain circumstances. In noticing, recognizing, or registering, its visually relevant similarities with paradigm exemplars of F, in the absence of countervailing evidence, application of 'F' therefore strikes her as correct in the light of those paradigms' involvement in her acquisition and understanding of that concept. Given her grasp of the concept in question, acquaintance with o makes its application to that very object evidently correct. It is the ground for her registration

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of precisely the similarities that constitute the truth of the application in question. The reason for the correctness of her judgement of F-ness is o itself, along with the paradigms that give this concept its content; and this reason, o, is precisely what enters into the fundamental nature of the subject's perceptual experience. For her experience just is conscious visual acquaintance, from a given point of view and in certain circumstances, with that very thing. Hence the fundamental contribution of perceptual experience itself to the acquisition of empirical knowledge is the presentation to the subject of the reasons for the correct application of her empirical concepts: the particular mind-independent physical objects themselves to which those concepts correctly apply.

Second, as I insisted above, perceptual knowledge that o is F itself depends upon far more than mere visual acquaintance with o. For S has to register o's visually relevant similarities with paradigm exemplars of F conceptually; and she may be acquainted with o and yet it fail thickly to look F in this way for a variety of reasons.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, she must actually make the judgement that o is F rather than merely noting o's thick look, as it were, and withholding judgement for some reason. Hence perceptual acquaintance is significantly more basic than any empirical knowledge itself; and, indeed, S may be acquainted with o without even actively entertaining any content concerning o at all. Acquaintance itself is therefore not a matter of being somehow guaranteed certain factual information about its mind-independent physical objects, or indeed of getting something right about those things at all. Rather, it provides a fundamental ground for getting anything right or wrong about the worldly constituents thereby presented in perception. Thick, conceptually registered, looks are

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<sup>6</sup> See 6.3 below for more detailed discussion of these possibilities.

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the product of such acquaintance, from a given point of view and in certain circumstances, along with recognition or categorization of its objects as of various kinds. As I put it earlier, the ways things look are the ways perceptually presented things look. And perceptual knowledge additionally involves actually endorsing thick looks in judgement. Thus acquaintance has to be combined with conceptual registration and endorsement for the acquisition of knowledge.

A great deal of the weight of this account clearly falls on the notion of the conceptual registration of visually relevant similarities with various paradigms. In particular, it is pressing once again to say something to distinguish this from perceptual representation as this figures definitively in the (CV) characterization of the nature of perceptual experience. I do not think that this can be done by giving some kind of alternative reductive analysis of registration as it figures in the (OV) notion of thick looks. Conceptual registration is in my view an irreducibly primitive notion that I attempt to convey throughout by appeal to such familiar commonsense activities as noticing, recognizing and seeing as. Still, two points in my opinion serve to establish the required distinction between (OV) registration and (CV) representation. First, acquaintance itself does not presuppose conceptual registration. Hence registration is not in this sense part of the fundamental nature of our basic perceptual relation with the mind-independent physical world. Second, registration is something that subjects themselves do, although they may be relatively automatically induced to do so in certain circumstances. Hence, again, this is not a feature of the most basic deliverances of our perceptual systems in our conscious experience of the world around us. Finally by way of clarification of conceptual registration as this figures in the (OV) epistemological account under development, it is worth pointing out

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explicitly again that this is absolutely not a matter of actually making any specific judgements about the mind-independent physical objects presented in perception, but rather of coming to appreciate their evident or apparent appropriateness on the basis of conscious acquaintance with those very things and understanding of the empirical concepts concerned.

I mentioned above that mistaken perceptual judgement and other epistemic failings of various kinds have to be handled separately and derivatively. These of course raise a number of epistemological issues; and I cannot possibly address all or even any of them fully here. I confine myself to brief comments outlining the (OV) treatment that I would propose of three kinds of case.

First, as I have been using the category throughout my discussion, an illusion is an experience in which a physical object, o, looks F, although o is not actually F.<sup>7</sup> According to (OV), this comes about when a person is visually acquainted with that very object, o, from a point of view and in circumstances in which it has visually relevant similarities with paradigm exemplars of F although it is not itself an instance of that kind. Let us suppose that o is G instead, where G is an alternative determinate, incompatible with F, of a shared determinable. If the subject registers o's visually relevant similarities with paradigm exemplars of F conceptually, then, although she is in fact acquainted with an object that constitutes a reason to apply the concept G, she understandably but mistakenly takes this to be a reason to apply the concept F instead. If she actually does apply 'F' in judgement, then this will of course not be a case of

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<sup>7</sup> As will become clear below, this characterization is not necessary for an illusion. There are complex cases in which complementary illusory factors 'cancel out' and an object looks F and is F, yet the experience is still illusory. See Johnston (2006). See ch. 1, n. 8 for possible counterexamples also to its sufficiency.

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knowledge, since her resultant belief is false. She may take herself to be presented with a reason for that false judgement. In fact she is not. For o is in fact no genuine reason to apply F at all: 'o is F' is simply false; and o is instead a reason to apply G. Still, given the misleading point of view and/or circumstances involved, her error is perfectly understandable.

Second, in hallucination, according to (OV), the subject is in a condition that cannot be distinguished by introspection alone from one of being perceptually presented with mind-independent physical objects of such and such kinds arranged thus and so before her.<sup>8</sup> She may thereby take herself to be acquainted with good reasons to make all sorts of judgements about the world around her. Again, though, none of these will be cases of knowledge, even if some of them turn out accidentally to be true. For she is not in fact acquainted with any such reasons at all.

Third, there may also be cases in which a person is visually acquainted with a mind-independent physical object, o, that is F, and in which o thickly looks F. Furthermore, she may endorse this thick look in judgement but still fail to acquire knowledge, as a result of the presence in her immediate environment of suitable 'ringers' for F's: objects that are not F's but that she might in the circumstances sufficiently easily have likewise taken to be F's as to undermine the epistemic standing of her actual true belief. I am not myself convinced that the mere presence ringers always undermines the status of her simple perceptual demonstrative judgement that o is F as knowledge. But in any such cases in which it does, I cannot see how the account I propose is less well placed than any other to accommodate this fact.

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<sup>8</sup> See 5.2 above for discussion of the (OV) approach to hallucination.

I cannot possibly resolve all the various familiar epistemological problems that come up in connection with each of these three kinds of obstacle to knowledge. I do hope to have said enough, though, at least to demonstrate that the present development of (OV) has a natural way to accommodate and characterize them, and is no less well equipped than any other available alternative to deal adequately with them.

All of this does raise the following pressing question though.<sup>9</sup> What are the respective epistemological contributions of (a) the direct object of perception itself and (b) the point of view and circumstances from which its visually relevant similarities with various paradigms come to light? I answer as follows. (a) It is a necessary condition upon a perceiver's having an experientially-based reason of the kind that I am elucidating here to apply the concept 'F' in judgement that she should be consciously acquainted with what is in fact a reason for such application, namely, a direct object of perception, o, that is in fact F.<sup>10</sup> That object o itself is a reason in the relevant sense to make the concept application in question in judgement. (b) It is a further necessary condition on that very reason coming to light in her experience that she be acquainted with o from a point of view and in circumstances that enable her registration of the appropriate visually relevant similarities that it has from that point of view and in those circumstances with the paradigms that are involved in her grasp of the concept 'F'. Satisfaction of the former but not the latter results in a case of acquaintance with what is in fact a reason to apply the concept 'F' in judgement that may nevertheless

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<sup>9</sup> A question urged on me recently in very fruitful discussion with Anil Gupta.

<sup>10</sup> It is of course possible to come to know that o is F on the basis of perception without actually seeing o at all, say, as when I know that my neighbour is at home by seeing her car in the drive; and this may be non-inferential knowledge. Still such cases are in my opinion more complex and less basic than those I have in mind here.

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not be evident to the subject. Satisfaction of the latter but not the former, in an illusory experience of an object that is actually G and not E, say, from a point of view and in circumstances relative to which it has visually relevant similarities with paradigm exemplars of E, results in a case in which perception is misleading in a way that may issue in understandable error in judgement.

These two necessary conditions are not jointly sufficient, though. For there may be cases of compensating compound illusion of the kind remarked by Mark Johnston (2006). In such cases a perceiver is acquainted with a direct object, o, that is in fact E from a point of view and in circumstances relative to which it has visually relevant similarities with paradigm exemplars of E due to the mutually compensating presence of two or more misleading factors normally individually responsible for illusion. For example, she may be looking at two twins of the same height. One is wearing horizontal strips making him look shorter than he is; but they are in an Ames room in which the gradual reduction of height towards one corner induces the illusion of people being increasingly taller than they are as they approach. If the striped twin is closer to the compressed corner than his brother by just the right amount, then they look the same height. Still this is a complex illusion in which two compensating illusory effects are offset. In such cases the subject does not have an experientially-based reason of the kind that I am elucidating here to apply the concept 'E' in judgement. In the case I describe, the perceiver does not have a perceptual reason to judge that the twins are the same height, even though she is acquainted with the twins who are the same height from a point of view and in circumstances in which they look the same height. I do not know how to add to the two necessary conditions given above in order to achieve sufficiency in the face of such possibilities. I am certainly

not attempting an analysis, though; and I doubt very much that any such thing could be provided. The point is rather simply to illustrate necessity of both (a) and (b) to the (OV) account of experience-based reasons outlined above. As we saw earlier with the potentially undermining effect of easily accessible ringers, and is evident here again with Johnston's veridical illusions, these two important necessary conditions fall short of sufficiency on their own for the subject's perceptual knowledge that o is F.<sup>11</sup>

### 6.3 Epistemic Priority

I return now to the positive epistemological account of the basic case of successful perceptual knowledge acquisition offered above on behalf of (OV). Sellars' initial concern about theorists' appeal to a 'given' in perception has the following general form. There is a philosophical problem concerning how to explain the status of perceptual experience as a source of factual empirical knowledge. It cannot possibly be an adequate solution to this problem to identify a feature of perception that is purportedly not subject to the same problems – namely that perceptual experience is simply conscious, “as a person who has been hit on the head is not conscious whereas a new born babe, alive and kicking, is conscious” (Sellars, 1997, p. 20) – and at the same time to insist that such experience is therefore already an instance of the initially problematic category of factual empirical knowledge. The proposed feature of

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<sup>11</sup> Johnston himself uses these cases of 'veridical illusion' in an argument against what he calls the 'Fact-Directed Attitude View' of sensing (2006). For, although the subject's experience is clearly defective in such cases, there is plausibly no false proposition suited to bring out the specific defect in question. My hostility to (CV) clearly makes me sympathetic to Johnston's opposition here. According to (OV), on the other hand, the subject is consciously acquainted with the mind-independent physical objects in question alright; and these may strongly look certain of the ways that they actually are; but the corroboration of various misleading features that lead to this result bar her possession of experience-based reasons for the relevant judgements that correlatively fail to attain the status of knowledge.



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perceptual experience cannot without serious explanation meet the following two conditions simultaneously. First, it is sufficiently undemanding not to be subject to the philosophical difficulties attending perceptual knowledge. Second it is sufficiently rich as itself to constitute a case of perceptual knowledge. I have explained how (OV) as I understand it avoids Sellars' own initial formulation of the inconsistency here. I consider now a recent formulation of a similarly structured challenge to any adequate theory of perceptual knowledge that emerges from Quassim Cassam's (forthcoming) discussion of Barry Stroud's work in this area (esp. Stroud, 2000a, and 2000b).

Although Stroud himself questions this (forthcoming), Cassam regards Stroud as imposing the following Epistemic Priority Requirement (EPR) upon any adequate philosophical explanation of knowledge of a certain kind, K: that we should explain how knowledge of kind K could come to be out of something that does not imply or presuppose knowledge of kind K (Cassam, forthcoming, p. 0000). There are certainly many moves in the history of epistemology that appear to be motivated by some such requirement. In particular, perfectly adequate everyday answers to questions about how a person knows what she does about the mind-independent physical world are universally rejected as satisfactory solutions to philosophical problems in the area apparently on the basis of failings along these lines. Still there is an important question what the principled motivation is for the requirement itself; and this immediately raises a number of important questions about its formulation, not least, how kinds like K are to be individuated and what is involved in an explanation of how knowledge of a given such kind could come to be out of something else. What I propose is to suggest provisional answers to these two questions at least in the course

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of explaining how (OV) as I have been developing it may therefore be in a position to meet an appropriately formulated version of (EPR).

Let us suppose again that the target phenomenon is S's visually-based knowledge that o is F for an appropriate mind-independent physical object, o, placed before him in relatively standard viewing conditions. According to the (OV) epistemological account sketched above, S is visually acquainted with o, which thickly looks F to him; and on this basis he judges that o is F. There are two points in this account where (EPR) threatens to bite. First, in the conditions upon its being determinately the case that the direct object of S's perception is the persisting mind-independent physical object o itself, rather than a mere surface, time-slice, or something even less substantial like the visual appearance of o from the relevant spatiotemporal point of view and in the relevant circumstances. Second, in the conditions upon S's conceptual registration of o's visually relevant similarities with the paradigms involved in his grasp of the concept F and his actual application of that concept to o in the judgement that o is F. I consider these briefly in turn.

The first point to make in connection with conscious acquaintance with particular mind-independent physical objects is that it is part of the point of (OV) that this is more basic than knowledge of empirical facts about those objects in at least the following sense. For any predicate 'Φ' that applies to o he may see o and not register its visually relevant similarities with paradigm Φ's, either because he has no conception of what a Φ is, and so has himself no relevant paradigms associated with that predicate, or because he pays no attention to o's similarities with any paradigm Φ's that he does associate with it – he is simply paying attention to other things.

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Furthermore, he may see  $\underline{o}$  and register its visually relevant similarities with such paradigm  $\underline{\Phi}$ 's and still fail to judge that  $o$  is  $\underline{\Phi}$  because he has a reason to take the situation to be misleading in some way. So simply seeing  $\underline{o}$ , being visually acquainted with that very thing in perception, neither implies nor presupposes any perceptual knowledge about  $\underline{o}$  or indeed, it seems, about anything else.

The situation is not quite so straightforward, though, even here in connection with the first point of application for (EPR) as distinguished above. For in ch. 7 below I consider the question of how the fact that the direct objects of perception according to (OV) are persisting mind-independent physical objects comes to light from the perceiver's own perspective in perception. Two features of my account are relevant here, although I can only state them without defence at this stage. First, the fact that we are acquainted with mind-independent physical objects themselves in perception shows up from our own perceptual perspective in our patterns of common-sense explanation: in the fact that we explain the actual and counterfactual order and nature of our perceptual experience of physical objects in general on the basis of the perceptible natures of those very objects that we perceive. For example, we explain the variation in the visual appearance of a coin viewed from head on and then increasingly from an angle on the basis of its constant circularity and the variation in viewing position; or we explain the fact that a jumper looks mauve by appeal to its red colour and the misleading paucity of the artificial lighting conditions. Second, given the theoretical role of the notion of a direct object of perception in elucidating the fundamental nature of the perceptual experience in question, in characterizing what it is to be in that very conscious condition, it is a necessary condition on its being a correct characterization of perception as acquaintance with mind-independent

physical objects that this fact does indeed show up in this way from the perceptual perspective.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, conscious acquaintance determinately with mind-independent object o involves S in patterns of commonsense-physical explanation of the actual and counterfactual order and nature of his perceptual experience of physical objects in general on the basis of the perceptible natures of the very objects that he perceives. This certainly involves S in an evolving world-view, of what is out there, how it comes to light in his experience and his own place in it. Much of this may in fact be knowledge about the physical world and about himself; and it may be difficult in practice to describe a situation in which none of it has this status; but its role in securing determinate acquaintance with the mind-independent physical object o does not depend upon or presuppose this fact. The de facto truth of his explanatory world-view would suffice for this purpose. So the conditions on perceptual acquaintance with mind-independent o itself are so far as I can see no obstacle to (OV) meeting (EPR).

I now turn to the conditions upon S's conceptual registration of o's visually relevant similarities with the paradigms involved in his grasp of the concept F and upon his actual application of that concept to o in the judgement that o is F. According to the (OV) account outlined above, perceptual knowledge consists in suitable circumstances in the endorsement in judgement of the way that mind-independent physical objects thickly look in perception. Such thick looks in the case in question involve S's conceptual registration of o's visually relevant similarities relative to his point of view and circumstances with certain paradigm exemplars of F that are central

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<sup>12</sup> See ch. 7 below for extended discussion and defence of these ideas.

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to his grasp of that very concept that he then goes on to apply in the judgement that o is F whose status as perceptual knowledge is in question. The general task before us is to assess the extent to which the outline epistemology I offer on behalf of (OV) is consistent with (EPR), the requirement that, for any relevant kind of knowledge, K, we should be able to explain how knowledge of kind K could come to be out of something that does not imply or presuppose knowledge of kind K. In particular, the current question is whether the conceptual registration and application in judgement that involved are may be in tension with this requirement.

Prima facie this may appear to be so. For conceptual registration apparently implies or presupposes perceptual knowledge at least concerning other F's in his environment that they are F. How else does he ever come to associate appropriate paradigms with the predicate 'F' in a way that genuinely contributes to his understanding of the relevant concept? Concept possession is an epistemic skill, at the very least a capacity to know an F when one encounters one in perception in the present case. So registering o's visually relevant similarities with paradigm exemplars of F as this absolutely crucially figures in the epistemic proposal that I have been advancing implies or presupposes perceptual knowledge that a, b and c are F for various other objects in the world around him. This is surely inconsistent with the intended interpretation of (EPR).<sup>13</sup>

One strategy to reinstate (EPR) at this stage would be to remark that, although the proposed account of perceptual knowledge that o is F does indeed imply or

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<sup>13</sup> It is perhaps worth pointing out that, even in the face of his distaste for any explicit formulation of (EPR), this is precisely Stroud's objection (forthcoming) to the role of simple seeing in any adequate philosophical explanation of perceptual knowledge.

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presuppose knowledge that a, b and c are F for various other objects in the world for the reasons given, it does not imply or presuppose prior knowledge that o is F, or indeed any other knowledge about o. Thus, severely restricting the range of ‘K’ in the initial formulation that we should explain how knowledge of kind K could come to be out of something that does not imply or presuppose knowledge of kind K preserves (EPR) intact. The claim would be that an account may still be given of how perceptual knowledge that o is F comes to be out of something that does not imply or presuppose any prior knowledge about o. My own assessment is that this is quite unsatisfactory, or at the very least not the best that we should aim for here. Stroud himself presents a number of powerful considerations in support of the idea that the properly philosophical epistemological project involves understanding the possibility of knowledge in a more general way than this interpretation of (EPR) requires (2000a, 2000b, forthcoming); and I believe that we can hold out for something significantly more general than this approach yields.

The strategy is correct in my opinion, though, in focusing attention upon the individuation of kinds of knowledge as these figure in (EPR). But the crucial distinction is not between knowledge about o, in particular knowledge that o is F, on the one hand, and knowledge about a, b and c, in particular that they are F, on the other. It is rather the distinction between perceptual knowledge and testimonial knowledge about the various objects that we see in the world around us, in particular to the effect that they are F. I grant that S’s registration of o’s visually relevant similarities with the paradigm exemplars of F that play a central role in his understanding of that concept involves an epistemic association of such paradigms with the predicate ‘F’ in a way that does imply or presuppose, at least in the most

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basic cases in which the concept possession in question is basic and non-descriptive, some knowledge that certain objects in the world around him are indeed F. But I would claim that this knowledge is in the first instance testimonial in kind. Crudely: S simply sees various objects around him and is told that they are F.<sup>14</sup> A great deal more needs to be said about the transition; but I claim that this enables him to go on and know for himself, as it were, on the basis of perception alone, that certain of the objects he simply sees in the world around him are also instances of the predicate 'F', just as I explain above. In this way he acquires the capacity for perceptual knowledge that o is F on the basis an epistemic-predicational skill that does not imply or presuppose perceptual knowledge.

It is worth remarking explicitly here on the dependence of perceptual knowledge upon testimonial knowledge that is embedded in this account of predication in perceptual knowledge. The epistemological order as I present it runs from the simple seeing of particular mind-independent physical objects in the world around us, through testimonial knowledge of their instantiation of various observational predicates, to our autonomous perceptual knowledge of the instantiation of those and suitably related predicates by the physical objects that we encounter in experience. This clearly raises many large issues and no doubt objections. All I would say for now here is that I take perceptual knowledge of empirical facts to be linguistically articulated propositional knowledge that depends upon our understanding of the terms used in its linguistic expression. The role of the crucial testimonial knowledge upon which such perceptual knowledge in my view depends is I take it precisely in the service of our acquiring

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<sup>14</sup> Perhaps a fuller story might even start more minimally with the idea initially at least of being told simply of that perceptually presented object – o – that 'F' applies.

understanding of the various predicational categories in terms of which our resultant perceptual knowledge is to be framed.<sup>15</sup>

In any case, according to the epistemological account that I offer on behalf of (OV), perceptual knowledge that  $\underline{o}$  is  $\underline{F}$  comes to be – in the language of (EPR) – out of two components. First, experiential acquaintance with  $\underline{o}$  in perception: simply seeing that particular object in our case. Second, registering its visually relevant similarities with the paradigm exemplars of  $\underline{F}$  that play a central role in understanding the predicate ‘ $\underline{F}$ ’, and judging that  $\underline{o}$  is  $\underline{F}$  on that basis. I claim that neither of these components implies or essentially presupposes perceptual knowledge. So the account is in good standing with respect to (EPR) at this stage.

The kind of explanation in demand in connection with (EPR) and putatively on offer above is also a delicate matter. For reasons that we have already seen, this is bound to be less than analytic entailment. That is to say, there may be cases of endorsement in judgement of a true thick perceptual look in just the way outlined above that nevertheless fall short of knowledge due to the easily accessible presence of ringers in the vicinity or to any of the other obstacles to knowledge that are prominent in the literature of counterexamples to various purported analyses of knowledge in general

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<sup>15</sup> This idea of an epistemologically fundamental role for testimony or something like it may also be of value in filling out my account of the consistency of (EPR) with the importance I insist upon of our facility with certain commonsense explanations of our perceptual experience in validating the identification of the direct objects of such experience with mind-independent physical objects themselves. Some such explanations may well have an epistemic standing derived from testimony rather than perception itself in such a way as to preserve (EPR) under the current individuation of kinds of knowledge ‘K’. See Eilan, Hoerl, McCormack and Roessler (2005) for an excellent survey of issues and options here for understanding the crucial role in the development of cognition of joint attention and engagement with the physical world that we share with others in perception and action.



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or perceptual knowledge in particular. I am myself persuaded by Williamson's thesis that no such analysis is possible (2000). So no such analytically entailing explanation is possible. Still, the explanation offered above is in my view an illuminating theoretical elaboration of the commonsense explanation in answer to the question how one knows on any given occasion that o is F that one can see o and knows an F when one sees one. For it illustrates in a way that is easily generalizable how this particular piece of knowledge about a particular mind-independent physical object comes to be, in de facto cooperating circumstances at least, out of more basic perceptual acquaintance with that very thing along with conceptual registration of its visually relevant similarities with the paradigm exemplars of F that are involved in possession of that very concept. Neither of these components implies or presupposes perceptual knowledge about that object, that kind, or indeed anything else – although the latter predication, and perhaps even the visual acquaintance itself, may well depend upon testimonial knowledge or something like it concerning various mind-independent objects in the world around the subject and also presented in perception. Of course this doesn't solve all possible epistemological questions concerning perception; but it does give a genuine explication of a particular piece of perceptual knowledge on the basis of conscious and cognitive capacities that do not presuppose it.

### 6.4 Perception and Reason

It will be immediately apparent to anyone at all familiar with my previous book Perception and Reason (1999) that my views on the rational basis for empirical knowledge have changed. In certain respects the changes are very significant. In other respects much remains the same. I certainly do not wish to get overly preoccupied

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with my own philosophical autobiography; but it may help in clarifying the present position to highlight a single key development in my views that has crucial application in connection with a prominent argument of that book. The key difference with the earlier work is that I now recognize that perceptual experience consists most fundamentally in conscious acquaintance, from a given point of view, in a particular sensory modality and in specific circumstances of perception, with mind-independent physical objects themselves. These very objects constitute the reasons for the correctness of the application of certain empirical concepts in judgement. Thus, when a person is visually presented with a given mind-independent physical object, o, that is E, from a relatively standard point of view and in relatively standard conditions, she is consciously acquainted with the very reason for applying the concept 'E'; and, given her registration of its visually relevant similarities with the paradigms involved in her grasp of that concept, she recognizes o as just such a reason. Thus o is the evident reason for her application of 'E' in judgement given her perceptual acquaintance with o and grasp of the concept 'E'.

This key difference has crucial application in connection with a prominent argument of my previous book. In ch. 5 of Perception and Reason I argue that the reasons that perceptual experiences must provide for empirical beliefs require a conceptualist version of (CV). That argument has two stages. The first stage makes explicit a connection between reasons and inference, and hence between giving reasons and identifying contents of a form which enables them to serve as the premises and conclusions of inferences. The second establishes a constraint upon genuine reasons – reasons for the subject – imposed by the way in which his own conceptual resources are available for the configuration of his mental states. Given the definition of

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conceptual mental states, as those with a representational content which is characterizable only in terms of concepts which the subject himself possesses and which is of a form which enables it to serve as a premise or the conclusion of a deductive argument or of an inference of some other kind, this yields the required conclusion, that having reasons in general consists in being in a conceptual mental state, and hence, in particular, that perceptual experiences provide reasons for empirical beliefs only if they have conceptual contents.

(OV) provides a radical alternative to the first stage of this argument. My previous idea was that making something intelligible from the point of view of rationality in the way essential to giving reasons necessarily involves identifying a valid deductive argument, or inference of some other kind, that articulates the source of the rational obligation (or permission) in question. The question then is how these crucial warranting inferences relate to the reason-giving states in question; and the second stage of the argument from Perception and Reason attempts to establish that such reason-giving states must themselves have contents of precisely the kinds that figure as the premises of the relevant inferences. Hence conceptualism follows. I now believe that my previously single-minded focus on the rationality of inference obscured the more fundamental normativity of concept application that plays the central grounding role in the epistemology of perceptual knowledge according to my development of (OV) here.

(OV) denies that the fundamental rational role of perceptual experience in connection with empirical belief is to be articulated by reference to any warranting inference. The core phenomenon is rather that of rationally subsuming a particular object under a

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general concept given conscious experiential acquaintance with the former and grasp in understanding of the latter. Perceptual presentation of particular mind-independent physical objects in this way provides conscious acquaintance with those very things that constitute reasons for the correctness of the application of certain empirical concepts in judgement. In registering the visually relevant similarities that a perceptually presented object  $\underline{o}$  has with the paradigms involved in our grasp of the empirical concept  $\underline{E}$ , we recognize  $\underline{o}$ 's status as a reason for us for applying that very concept in judgement, provided that we are interested in the question of what  $\underline{o}$  is like in respect of  $\underline{E}$ -ness of course. In this way, perceptual experience provides us with genuinely recognizable reasons for empirical beliefs without any commitment to (CV) at all, never mind a specifically conceptualist such commitment. Of course, endorsing the thick looks of mind-independent physical objects in judgement in this way does provide conceptual contents that in turn offer inferential reasons for further empirical beliefs. The omission in my previous account was of the absolutely essential fundamental ground for this whole enterprise of empirical knowledge acquisition in the evidently rational subsumption of perceived particulars under the general concepts available in understanding.

Finally, recall the argument that I mentioned in ch. 4 above from the transparency of perceptual experience to (CV).<sup>16</sup> The premise, very roughly, is that in attempting introspectively to scrutinize the nature of our perceptual experience we seem to alight directly upon the mind-independent physical world – at least as it appears to be – rather than any evident constituents or qualities of the experience itself. Hence it is supposed to follow that the nature of perceptual experience is to be given by how

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<sup>16</sup> Strictly speaking this is an argument against certain alternatives to (CV).

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things appear in that experience to be in the mind-independent physical world, that is, by its representational content.

As I remarked then, proponents of (CV) who appeal explicitly to the transparency claim in this way do so effectively in order to motive their position over some form of indirect realism theory along the lines discussed in ch. 3 above, or perhaps over versions of (CV) that appeal to non-representational qualia as well as worldly representational contents in accounting for the nature of perceptual experience.<sup>17</sup> They may or may not assume that their position is the only possible alternative to such views. In any case, we are now in a position to see more clearly how (OV) is at least as well placed as (CV) endorse transparency. For it is quite right to insist that the result of our introspective scrutiny of visual experience, say, is simply the way that things in the mind-independent physical world look. The whole point of (OV), though, is that the way things look in perception, which is the target of such introspective scrutiny, just is the way the things look that are the direct objects of conscious visual acquaintance and whose such looks are explained precisely on this basis above. So transparency is a direct result of the view and therefore certainly fails to favour (CV) in the current context.

This concludes my elucidation, motivation and defence of the core of my own positive account (OV) of the nature of perceptual experience. I claim that this is the most promising context for a full and satisfying defence of empirical realism as the simple conjunction of (I) and (II), along with the rejection of (III), from my opening Inconsistent Triad.

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<sup>17</sup> For examples of the latter target see Peacocke (1983) and Block (1996, 1998 and 2003).

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- (I) Physical objects are mind-independent.
- (II) Physical objects are the direct objects of perception.
- (III) The direct objects of perception are mind-dependent.

(OV) offers an entirely adequate explanation of illusion and hallucination that is integrated with a suitably nuanced account of the way things look in visual perception quite generally; and it provides a fully compelling explication of the role of perceptual experience in the provision of empirical knowledge. The central claim is that perceptual experience consists most fundamentally a relation of conscious acquaintance, from a spatiotemporal point of view, in a sense modality and in certain circumstances of perception, with particular mind-independent physical objects in the world around the perceiver. The question that I pursue in ch. 7 below is how the mind-independence of these direct objects of perception shows up from the subject's own perceptual perspective, how this aspect in particular of the nature of the proposed objects of conscious perceptual acquaintance is evident to the subject.