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FOUNDATIONS OF PERCEPTUAL KNOWLEDGE

Bill Brewer

Perception provides us with knowledge of the way things are in the world around us. How is this possible; and what does its possibility tell us about the nature of perceptual experience? I argue for mutually supporting accounts of the epistemic authority of perception and of a crucial feature of the content of sense experience. First, a number of familiar moves in the theory of perceptual knowledge, against which I develop my own position.

I. RELIABILISM, INTERNALISM AND CLASSICAL FOUNDATIONALISM

A *reliabilist* account is one on which true perceptual beliefs constitute knowledge just in case the appropriate relations between world, experience, and belief are reliable: similar beliefs acquired in the same way in relevant possible worlds are also true.¹ *Internalists* insist on a further rationality requirement on knowledge. Satisfaction of the reliability condition would be external to the subject's mind in the following sense. He need have no recognition whatsoever that the condition obtains: no idea whether, how, or why he is right in believing what he does. The internalist thought, on the other hand, is that knowledge is at least *reasonable* belief: the subject must have some sense of why he is right in holding it, how he is onto the truth. A fairly neutral way of putting this general

requirement is that if a perceptual belief is to constitute knowledge, then the perceiver must know how he is right about the way things are in the world around him.²

It might be objected that this formulation is already too restrictive to capture the variety of ways in which the internalist intuition could be filled out.³ Why must the requirement be for knowledge of *how* one is right? Could one not have overwhelming evidence, even from experience, *that* one's belief is correct without thereby knowing how it is so? Suppose a person believes on the basis of his perception that there is a storm brewing. His reasons for this belief may all concern further perceptible features of his environment and make no reference to how he is in a position to get the weather right in any stronger sense. He simply points to the ominous dark grey clouds, gusting winds, and oppressive atmosphere, without any mention of his relations with these facts.

I have two points to make in reply to this objection. First, my formulation of the internalist requirement is intended, at least at the outset, to admit a reading on which this scenario is acceptable. After all, citing such suggestive features of one's environment is a perfectly normal response to the question, "How do you know that there is a storm brewing?". Second, as my own position unfolds, it will become clear

that I favor a way of meeting the requirement, at least in the most central and basic cases, which does involve some sensitivity to one's mode of access to what one knows on the basis of perception, which calls for knowledge of *how* one is in epistemic contact with the facts in question in a more substantial sense than is envisaged above. Although, as I say, I do not assume it right away, I believe that this stronger reading is essential. For it captures the crucial sense in which these paradigm cases of perceptual knowledge are non-inferential. Establishing this quite generally goes beyond the scope of this paper, and indeed cuts to the heart of the traditional debate between foundationalists and coherentists. The argument is closely related to the infinite regress argument standardly proposed in favor of some form of foundationalism. In very rough outline, it goes as follows. The cited features of the perceiver's environment constitute reasons for his belief that there is a storm brewing only if he has reason to regard them as such; and this in turn requires that he knows how he is in a position to get them, or other more basic facts, right directly, that is, non-inferentially, in his experience of them.⁴ For present purposes, though, I plead for the most tolerant reading of my formulation above.

Classical foundationalism (Dancy, 1988, intro.) is an influential attempt to satisfy this internalist intuition. Perceptual beliefs about the external world are reasonable, in the required sense, because they can be inferred from foundational introspective knowledge by means of a warranted general experience-world linking principle. A person knows how he is right about the way things are around him on the basis of perception, because

- (i) the way things appear to him is 'given' in experience; and
- (ii) he knows that that appearance is a reliable

indicator that the world is as he believes it to be.

Both (i) and (ii) are problematic. Given the requirements of the theory, it is difficult to specify precisely what is known, and how, in (i); and attempts to establish the experience-world linking principle employed in (ii) are notoriously open to objection. In connection with the first point, there are three problems. First, a person's awareness of the way things appear to him in experience must be sufficiently immediate—incorrigible, self-intimating or whatever—to stand in need of no justification, yet its content must be sufficiently substantial to provide foundations for all his empirical knowledge (Dancy, 1985, pp. 58-61). Second, what he knows in this way supplies the factual premise of an inference, yet it is to be "given" independently of the theoretical or linguistic background required to justify its essential conceptual structure (Wittgenstein, 1958, §§ 293-302; Sellars, 1963, I). Third, how is the motivating internalist intuition supposed to be satisfied at this foundational level of introspection (Sellars, 1963, VIII)? In connection with knowledge of the experience-world linking principle, the foundationalist's austere conception of the subject's epistemic predicament obstructs all the standard proposals: induction, inference to the best explanation, and transcendental argument (Alston, 1993). I shall not rehearse these objections here, although I do believe that they can jointly be made fatal. Instead, I want to suggest an alternative approach to satisfying what I think is right about the internalist requirement on perceptual knowledge.

II. A NEW APPROACH TO PERCEPTUAL KNOWLEDGE

Classical foundationalism is correct in admitting the need to satisfy something in

the requirement that the subject should know (on the basis of his experience) how he is right about the way things are around him. It goes astray in proposing the wrong feature of experience to do this. The crucial point is not that we have infallible knowledge at least of how our experience is, from which we must somehow build out to knowledge of an external world. It is rather that our experience presents us directly with a world of things *around us*, spatially related not only to each other, but also to ourselves. Perception is *perspectival*: centered on the subject and displaying the way the world is in relation to him. For example, I feel something hard *over to my right*, hear a bang *behind me* or see something moving *left to right in front of me*. These perceptions have what I call “*egocentric spatial content*” presenting the spatial relations between what I perceive and myself, the perceiver, in a particular way. This is their foundational epistemological feature. For, as I argue, egocentric spatial perception displays its objects as *epistemically accessible* to the perceiver. Our awareness of the world as arranged determinately around us in this way is given in terms of the consequent possibilities for our action on the things we perceive *and their impact upon us in experience*.⁵ So in veridical perception, we are presented with things “out there” in such a way that we grasp immediately how we are right about the way they are. In being aware of their spatial relations to us we are aware of certain of their causal relations to us; i.e. we are aware of the accessibility of their being the way they are in that very perception.

Contrast the normal perceptual situation with an equally reliable process of belief-formation which only someone utterly immune to the internalist intuition would find epistemically satisfying. Suppose that hunches periodically occur to me, accompanied by a blinding light, which are

extremely reliable as to what my sister is doing at the time. We can even suppose a hitherto unknown causal mechanism explaining their occurrence and reliability. Nevertheless, my beliefs formed on their basis surely fall short of knowledge. For I have absolutely no conception of how or whether they might be correct; nothing whatsoever makes such beliefs any more reasonable for me than their denial.

One way to improve matters is to adopt the strategy of classical foundationalism. Assume for the sake of argument that my knowledge of the content of such hunches is unproblematic. When one occurs to me, I just know that it is a hunch that my sister is swimming, say. The suggestion would be that a true belief that she is swimming formed on this basis meets the internalist requirement on knowledge just if I know that such hunches are reliable. I could do this, for example, by learning about the underlying causal mechanism—how it works, or just that there is one—or simply by experiencing repeated confirmed instances. Coming to see my hunches as a reliable source of information about my sister, I might therefore acquire the capacity for a kind of extrasensory perception.

This may suffice to meet the internalist requirement here. But it will not do as an account of the epistemological role of experience in perceptual knowledge quite generally. As such it would be viciously circular: particular pieces of perceptual knowledge resting on prior knowledge of the general reliability of perceptual belief and vice-versa. It also radically misrepresents the phenomenology of perceptual knowledge. Yet in bringing the phenomenology closer, by filling out the blinding light, as it were, with the egocentric spatial content of perceptual experience, we dispense with the need for anything like the classical foundationalist approach. The internalist requirement is

met directly instead, by the presentation of the objects of experience as accessible to us, in virtue of the egocentric spatial relations between them and us which are displayed in experience.

It would not do here, in line with standard externalist accounts of perceptual knowledge, simply to create a closer correlation between the intrinsic nature of experience and the content of beliefs to which it gives rise. A possibility along these lines would be that my hunches are accompanied by an image of a sign describing what my sister is doing - "SWIMMING" (or, indeed, by a simple visual image of her swimming⁶) - rather than an undifferentiated blinding light. Still, I have no idea on the basis of such experience how I might thereby be right about what she is doing. This is quite mysterious. So nothing makes my belief that she is swimming any more reasonable for me than its denial. As in the initial case, knowledge of the reliability of such pronouncements would transform my belief into *instrumental knowledge*, conceived by analogy with using an instrument to inform me about certain otherwise inaccessible states of affairs. But the epistemic status of such a procedure requires prior, independent knowledge of the reliability of the instrument, if the internalist intuition is to be satisfied. An egocentric spatial presentation of what I correctly take to be her swimming, there in front of me, on the other hand, as a part of the total and integrated sensory presentation of myself-in-the-world, not only prompts a true belief, that my sister is currently swimming, by a method which is generally reliable; I contend that it also informs me there and then how I am right about what she is doing. For the accessibility to me in that very experience of her actually swimming is evident in the egocentric perceptual presentation of her swimming, *there*, in front of me.

The crucial question, of course, is precisely what the definitive character of its egocentric spatial content is, which enables our experience directly to meet the internalist requirement on perceptual knowledge. My starting point is the idea that perception presents its objects as determinately spatially related to the perceiver. Although one does not figure as one object among many on a par with those one perceives in the normal way, their spatial relations with oneself are nevertheless displayed in perception. It is the actual spatial relations between the things one perceives *and oneself* which determine whether where they seem to be is where they really are. Thus, it is in relation to oneself that things are perceptually presented as determinately located.

It may immediately be objected that this starting point has the implication that all perceptual experience involves representation of the perceiver in its content. Yet ordinary perception is not self-reflective in this sense.⁷ It is certainly true that one does not normally encounter oneself as an object of perception. Surveying the perceptually displayed scene, one is not normally among the many possible objects of attention, as one would be, say, when looking in a mirror, or feeling the configuration of one's legs. There need be no *explicit* representation of oneself in this sense in the content of experience. Nevertheless, there is *implicit* representation, very much like that characteristic of indexical thought. Take the case of the present tense, for example. A person's thought "it is cold" involves no explicit representation of the time of utterance, yet its truth-conditions essentially concern the temperature *at that time*. Similarly, even given the noted absence of explicit representation of oneself in perception, the correctness of its spatial content is essentially relative to one's own location. For where must we look to discover

whether a person's perception that there is a cat just *there* (in front) on the mat is veridical? Not on any old mat; nor on the mat with all, or most, of the qualitative features he is able to report on the basis of his experience, since however detailed the description, there may be more than one such mat; but on the mat directly *in front of him*. In this sense, his perception is an implicit representation of him as located thus and so in relation to its objects.

Given the possibility of massive reduplication (Strawson, 1959, ch. 1), the point applies however much additional qualitative information is provided, including spatial relations with other descriptively identified objects. In other words, indeterminacy equally affects the purported identification "on the mat below the window between the red chair and the blue sofa," for example, and every other such attempt. Perceptually presented locations are in the end uniquely determined only demonstratively, as up/down, left/right, in front/behind; and these determinations are essentially subject-relative. For the place perceptually presented as to the right a little up and in front, say, is that to *the perceiver's* right, a little above and in front of *him*. Hence my starting point, that perception presents its objects as determinately spatially related to the perceiver.

Objective spatial relations between things can be represented in different ways. By this I mean simply to appeal to an application of Frege's (1960) distinction between sense and reference to predicates for spatial relations, where I assume that distinct senses determining a given reference are individuated by the corresponding accounts of what makes it the case that a person is representing *that* reference when each is employed.⁸ Thus, the fact that certain objects stand in such and such spatial relations with a person can be displayed in different ways, each characterized in terms

of what makes it the case that it is those specific relations which are represented as obtaining. In other words, we can distinguish between the various ways in which a person might be presented with things as standing in such and such spatial relations with him in terms of what it means for him to have things displayed as related in this, rather than some other way, in each of them.

What it means for a person to have things displayed as standing in certain spatial relations with him in the peculiarly perspectival way in which this occurs in his direct perceptual experience of them is to be spelt out in terms his grasp of how their being accessible to him in perception, as well as being available to him for action of various basic kinds, depends upon such spatial relations. It is this systematic dependence of things' perceptibility by him upon their spatial relations with him, and the other things around him, which helps to specify the reference frame and metric by which such perceptual representations of spatial relations succeed in representing determinate objective relations. The obvious contrast between the normal perceptual case and the following illustrates the point.

Suppose that I have a model of the building I am in, with "you are here" written next to a stick figure in the cell representing my room. Suppose further that each cell of the model has a bulb in it, which is on or off depending on whether the light in the room it represents is on or off. Simply watching the bulbs is insufficient for knowledge of whether the light is on or off in any given room. For I have no idea how the beliefs I form in this way might be right. The model would become a source of instrumental knowledge if I learnt of its reliability as an indicator of whether various lights are on or off. (This corresponds to the classical foundationalist's conception, which I reject, of perceptual knowledge as

inferred from introspection of appearances.) Although my spatial relations with the rooms around me are represented by the model, they are not represented in the right way for this to serve directly as a source of knowledge, without further evidence of its status as a reliable instrument. If these relations were displayed as they are in egocentric perception, on the other hand — if I were looking out of my window at the lights going on and off around me — then there would be no need for any such supporting evidence. The accessibility of these facts to me in perception would be as much a part of its content as the information about whether the lights are on or off.

The crucial difference between the more detached representation by the model and my direct perception is that the coordinate system for *perceptually* displayed spatial relations is given immediately in terms of their consequences for my action and perception: the availability of things at such and such locations for certain basic actions — like *that* (reaching for an object I see) — and their accessibility to me in experience — like *that* (moving to see more or less of a partially occluded object). In the model, I simply figure as one object among others, considered from no particular point of view, and standing in such and such spatial relations with them. What enables me to use this as a representation of the way things are at determinate places *around me* is my adding to my general conception of what it is for arbitrary things to stand in such and such spatial relations an identification of one of the model's objects with myself. So my grasp of the consequences of how things are for what I might or might not be able to see or touch depends upon a reflective appeal to the spatial enabling conditions for that mode of perception. In perception, on the other hand, determinacy in spatial content relies directly upon my understanding how to exploit the systematic

dependence of perceptibility upon spatial relations, rather than on any explicit application of a general theory to the particular case.

It is worth stressing the integrated, cross-modal nature of this egocentric perceptual perspective. By this I mean to highlight two related features of spatial perception. First, the fact that egocentric locations are identified on the basis of a single system of spatial representation common to each of the sensory modalities, and also the organization of action. That is, the identity or distinctness of visually and tactually presented locations, say, is evident without any need for reflection or calculation: they are *perceived* as the same. Similarly, the way in which locations are identified in hearing, say, is on the basis of precisely the system of spatial representation which is employed directly in the control and co-ordination of intentional action (see Brewer, 1993). Second, this is not just a matter of a number of distinct channels, as it were, conveniently all speaking the same language. Rather, the egocentric spatial significance of each sensory modality, and of the intentions controlling action, is ineliminably bound up with the integration of that modality with the others. Following Michael Ayers, consider, as a single example among many, the possibility of a total inversion of the visual field by prismatic spectacles.

Since everything seen is (until the brain adjusts) seen as inverted, the frame of reference for the apparent inversion must lie outside the deliverances of sight, in the sensory field as a whole. That is to say, the frame must be supplied by the other senses . . . in so far as they are integrated with vision (Ayers, 1991, pp. 187-188).

He sums up the overall position as follows.

It is wrong to think of the senses as in general the source of disparate streams of information or content, each discrete from the

deliverances of the other senses which it is left to some superior intellectual faculty to relate to one another in constructing knowledge of objects in space. The common objects of the different senses are presented as such, and as spatially and causally related to us (1991, pp. 153-154)⁹

In short, perception as a whole unites to present a single world around a single subject.

Furthermore, these features of spatial perception are neatly explained by, and hence lend further support to, my claim that its frame of reference and metric across the modalities are given by the subject's grasp of the systematic dependence of perceptibility upon egocentric location.

My thesis, then, is that perception provides a reason for the beliefs a person correctly forms on its basis by informing him how he is right about the way things are in the world around him on its basis. This is not because he has independent proof of an *epistemic principle* to the effect that certain appearances are reliable indicators of certain worldly states of affairs, which combines with some foundational introspective knowledge of appearances to form an argument in favor of these beliefs. Yet his simply instantiating such an epistemic principle, correctly forming beliefs in response to appearances in a way which happens to be reliable, fails to give him any real *reason* insofar as this notion is sensitive to the internalist requirement on perceptual knowledge. It is rather that the egocentric spatial content of perception displays the things around him in such a way as to make evident the accessibility to him in that very experience of the way they are.

III. FOUNDATIONALISM?

In what sense is my account *foundationalist* in structure? Conceptions of what constitutes foundationalism vary. So I

answer the question by highlighting three important points and contrasting my own view with that of Roderick Chisholm's (1989) *Theory of Knowledge*.

First, there is an extremely important distinction between direct perceptual knowledge, as I am conceiving of it, and what I call "instrumental knowledge", e.g. of the current through an electric circuit on the basis of an ammeter reading. In the former, a person's knowledge how he is right is intrinsic to the way he acquires that very belief, to his experience of things as thus and so itself. In instrumental cases, on the other hand, satisfaction of this internalist requirement depends upon further, independent knowledge about the method involved, additional information that the appropriate instrument is reliable. This is *extrinsic* in that it is possible to confront the instrument and acquire a true belief as a result, yet to have no substantive conception whatsoever of how one might be right.

Second, instrumental knowledge always depends upon direct perceptual knowledge. It essentially involves knowledge of the condition of an 'instrument', from which the relevant truth can be inferred on the basis of the instrument's reliability. In other words, non-inferential knowledge provides foundations for inferential knowledge.

Third, there is an important issue I leave open here about the limits, if any, on what can be known directly, that is non-instrumentally and non-inferentially, in perception. I distance myself completely from any suggestion that these admit only introspective knowledge of purely subjective appearances. Perception constitutes an epistemologically foundational presentation of the way things are in the external world around the perceiver. But which of the ways things are are such as might be open to direct perceptual knowledge? My speculation is that this varies, both between

people and within people over time, depending upon what we might call their "conceptual-recognitional sophistication." I admit that this is unsatisfactory and incomplete, but it may be worth saying that the way I would fill it out is consistent with a kind of coherentism with respect to linguistically articulated empirical knowledge. My recognition of the shiny hard cream thing in front of me a little to the left as a *telephone*, for example, depends upon my knowledge of what telephones are. Thus, my perceptual knowledge that the telephone is cream colored is hardly "self-justifying." Nevertheless, the egocentric spatial content of my experience is essential to my understanding how I am right that there is indeed a cream colored telephone there, which is in turn essential to my epistemic condition.

Given my argument so far, the obvious question on which to compare my account with Chisholm's (1989) is "how the role of appearances differs from that of mere hunches that one might have about external things" (p. 67). His answer is that in the case of appearances there is, whereas in that of hunches there is not, an occurrence, one's perceptual experience, which one takes to be, or interprets as, a *sign* of an external fact. Indeed, he goes on to admit that "if one were to interpret the hunch as being a kind of external prodding and to assume that it is a way of being prodded by a [specific kind of] external [occurrence], then, perhaps, we would have to say of 'being prodded by' pretty much what we have said about 'being appeared to by'" (pp. 67-68). Experiences are conscious effects of the world's impact on a person. Knowledge of their intrinsic nature as appearances that things are thus and so is "given"; and they reliably produce true beliefs about the way the world is around him via his correctly taking them to be signs of how things are out there, signs which are caused precisely by things being as they are.

Over and above all the difficulties with the classical foundationalist conception of an experiential "given," this account is also unfaithful to the internalist intuition. It is claimed that perceptual appearances reliably mediate a person's acquisition of beliefs about the world around him, with the help of an equally reliable second-order belief that such appearances are caused by the external facts they represent. Nevertheless, on such an account, this additional conviction as to how he is right is itself wholly ungrounded. Internalism is motivated by the need to distinguish knowledge from true blind hunches, however reliable. Insisting on an additional true belief that such hunches are reliable, however natural and reliable this in turn may be, is little help if it simply amounts to a further groundless blind hunch.

My own proposal has more in common with Descartes' (1986) appeal to clear and distinct perception. He conceives of this as a direct conscious apprehension of the truth, as the truth, which constitutes a non-inferential right to judge that things are thus and so: a condition being in which essentially involves knowledge how one is right. This is exactly the role of egocentric perception on my account. In perceiving the way things are around us, we grasp how their being as we take them to be is accessible to us in that very experience: we clearly and distinctly perceive the truth.

BonJour (1978) objects to this notion of a way of acquiring truths, the status of which as such is immediately apparent to the subject as follows.

One and the same cognitive state must somehow constitute both an apprehension of the state of affairs and a justification of that very apprehension, thus pulling itself up by its own cognitive bootstraps. One is reminded here of Chisholm's claim that certain cognitive states justify themselves, but that extremely paradoxical remark hardly

constitutes an explanation of how this is possible (p. 10).

Chisholm ignores the real challenge here. Indeed, he seems to acknowledge that it cannot be met, by giving up on the internalist intuition which motivates it. It can be met, though, in my view; and I attempt to do so. The reason why BonJour regards this notion of clear and distinct perception as incoherent, at least in connection with empirical knowledge, is his purely inferential, rather than more flexibly *perceptual*, conception of justification.¹⁰ Given the idea that epistemic justification is concerned exclusively with inferential relations between descriptions of the world, it is difficult to see how there could possibly be an apprehension of a state of affairs which itself justifies the belief in things being as apprehended. For this would amount to a description of the way things are in the world, simply understanding which supplies premises from which its truth can be inferred. Perhaps this is the case with certain analytic truths; but it clearly cannot be so for any empirical description whose truth goes beyond anything knowledge of which is required for its understanding. I aim to exploit the possibility of an alternative model of epistemic justification.

Egocentric perceptual content cannot be captured by any detached description of the world. It constitutes an essentially perspectival presentation of the way things are around the subject, whose displayed locations are determined by his grasp of the systematic dependence of what he can perceive upon where they are in relation to him. Correlative with this egocentric perspective is the notion of a basic, non-inferential, epistemic right to judge that things are thus and so out there. For his possession of conscious perceptual experience with the appropriate egocentric spatial content in itself involves his

knowledge how he is right about them. There is no need for any reflective inference from his current subjective condition and its general reliability as an indicator of objective states of affairs to the likely truth of his judgment.¹¹

IV. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES¹²

1. Any perceptual content can apparently be simulated in imagination. Yet imagination could not be a source of knowledge how a true hunch happened to be true. So no perceptual content can be so either.

There are different cases of imagination. Most differ in at least one of the following important respects from direct egocentric perception of the kind I have been outlining as epistemologically central. Those which do can thereby be ruled out as counter-examples to my thesis; those which do not can be treated for the present purposes as variants of perceptual illusion, and thereby present analogous problems to those considered under objection 2 below.

First, there is the completeness and integration of the content. If a true hunch is accompanied by an "appropriate" simple visual image, e.g. of my sister swimming, then this is not yet a total and integrated sensory presentation of the world around me; the visual image is contradicted by my perceptual experience in other modalities.¹³ Genuine egocentric perception, on the other hand, comes as a fully integrated cross-modal presentation of myself-in-the-world. Only as such can it present my sister as epistemically accessible to me in the way which constitutes an epistemic right to belief.¹⁴

Second, what makes a perception of my sister swimming a perception *of her* is in a large part the fact that it is a response *to her*, causally dependent upon *her* being the way she is in front of me. (Of course it also has to be an "appropriate" response,

in some sense: I could not very easily see her as a broken milk bottle.) That my consequent belief also concerns my sister is dependent upon the fact that my perception does so. On the whole, an image attending a hunch, on the other hand, is only an image *of my sister* because my hunch itself concerns her. (Perhaps it is also necessary that the image should be sufficiently qualitatively like her not to rule this out.) Such an image is an *epistemologically* epiphenomenal accompaniment to a mere hunch whose justification, if any, has to come from elsewhere.

Third, imagination is often *voluntary* simulation, or pretence perception. As such, it is experience explicitly within the scope of a counter-factual hypothesis, introspectibly quite distinct from the impact of the world upon the “passive” perceiver.¹⁵ Furthermore, if I am engaged in this kind of introspectibly distinguishable active simulation, then I shall not be inclined to endorse as actually the case, the way things appear in imagination. (At least, I shall not be inclined to do so in the normal way, although there may well be epistemologically acceptable uses of such imaginative simulation, in coming to know, for example, how things appear from another person’s point of view, or how something might look from a different position.) There will be no actual belief of mine whose status as knowledge is up for assessment.

Complete, cross-modally integrated, “passive” imagination, introspectibly indistinguishable from genuine perception, whose content is endorsed in judgement, is effectively delusion, hallucination, or simply perceptual illusion. This is the concern of a second and related objection.

2. Even granted that experience does present things as epistemically accessibly thus and so, in virtue of the perspectival egocentricity of its spatial content, what

reason is there for the perceiver to take *this* to be the way they really are? What reason is there to endorse the complex content “*a* is epistemically accessibly *F*”? After all, such experience *might* be in error as a whole. It is hopeless to appeal to anything *further* in its content. For the same worry would apply equally in connection with any improved content.

This is a version of the traditional argument from error for skepticism. The point is that for every veridical perceptual experience there is a possible non-veridical experience subjectively indistinguishable from it. How, then, can veridical experience possibly constitute an epistemic right to belief, even if it does have the complexity in its content which I claim?

I begin my response with some comments on the subjective indistinguishability of experiences. This is a very slippery notion. Especially so in the context of a discussion of perceptual knowledge, since it is itself essentially epistemic, having to do with the possibility of a person *telling* two of his experiences apart in various senses. There are at least the following three ways of reading the first premise of the above objection, that every veridical experience has a subjectively indistinguishable non-veridical correlate.

- (a) A subject of veridical experience is not thereby in a position knowledgeably to rule out the possibility that the facts displayed by his experience do not obtain.
- (b) A subject of veridical experience is not thereby in a position knowledgeably to rule out the possibility that his experience is non-veridical.
- (c) A subject of veridical experience is not thereby in a position infallibly to rule out the possibility that his experience is non-veridical.

Reading this first premise as either (a) or (b) is question-begging in the present

context. For both simply *assume*, contrary to my central thesis, that a subject of veridical experience is *not* thereby in a position to know that the facts displayed by his experience obtain. That (a) assumes this is obvious. For if the subject is in a position to know that these facts obtain, then he is clearly in a position knowledgeably to rule out the possibility that they do not. Similarly, though, if he is in a position to know that these facts obtain, then given his surely unproblematic knowledge that his experience at least represents them as obtaining, he is in a position to infer that his experience is veridical, and therefore knowledgeably to rule out the possibility that it is non-veridical. Hence (b) also makes the question-begging assumption.

So we are left with reading (c). I gladly admit that this is true. In what remains of this section, I argue that it does not follow that perceptual experience cannot constitute an epistemic right to belief. The crux of my defense is that, on the proposed account of perceptual experience, this essentially involves within its own content a presentation of the accessibility to the subject of the displayed worldly states of affairs in virtue of the spatial relations between them. Hence, when he is right about the world, he automatically understands how he is so. Thus, his epistemic right to belief obtains, and he normally *knows* that the world is thus and so around him. Of course, this will not follow in extraordinarily disobliging circumstances: e.g. in an environment suddenly flooded with excellent counterfeits of the (real) dollar bill which he recognizes in perception. Certain knowledge claims may therefore be defeated even in the presence of a genuine epistemic right to belief of the kind I have been discussing; but such cases are essentially abnormal.¹⁶ More importantly, such rights are themselves defeasible, in the sense that a person is not *infallible* about

whether or not he has one. A subjectively indistinguishable correlate, in sense (c), of a veridical experience *appears* to give him equal right to endorse the belief in question. But in this case, since he is not in fact onto the truth about the world in the way in which he seems to be, indeed, not in any way at all, his apparent right to belief is undermined. In the veridical case, his epistemic right depends upon his correct grasp of how he is right in his worldly belief. If this grasp is defective, which it is bound to be in any non-veridical case, then the epistemic right is merely apparent.

To round out this defense, let me stress to begin with that, on the proposed account, perceptual experience constitutes a *non-inferential* right to judgment, in no need of independent support from reflective knowledge of its reliability as a source of belief from which the likely truth of the relevant judgment follows by subsumption. It does so because veridical perception *essentially* involves a person's knowledge how he is right about the way things are around him. This is not an eliminable or gratuitous addition, but something intrinsic to any egocentric presentation of the world, whose content therefore cannot possibly figure as that of a blind hunch in need of further inferential justification. Of course perception is fallible. So any reason it appears to provide for belief can only be defeasible in the sense given above, and no head-on refutation of external world skepticism can possibly be given on the skeptic's own terms. Nor is one required. Reasonable judgement is judgment in the light of a correct understanding of how one is right. This may come from independent knowledge of the reliability of some kind of instrument or of a particular way of acquiring beliefs. It need not do so; and in the case of perception, the way the world is and how one is right about it are equally evident in experience itself.

A comparison with deduction is instructive here. In following an argument there is always the possibility of unnoticed error, just as perception is not an error-free openness to the way the world is around me. In fully understanding a valid argument, though, I see how its steps preserve truth. This is quite different from any blind manipulation of my beliefs, as if by benevolent hypnosis, or the exercise of a brute inclination to acquire them in accord with certain valid arguments. For I know how I am right in endorsing the conclusion. Yet this is not because I have a further true belief that the argument is valid, which might just be a blind hunch. Nor is there any reflective subsumption of the argument under my general knowledge of the validity of all arguments of that form. I need not discern its form explicitly; and no knowledge of formal logic is required. In any case, the suggestion that I deduce the truth of my conclusion, that *p*, from a *further* argument—(i) arguments of form *F* with true premises have true conclusions; (ii) “*p*” is the conclusion of an argument of form *F* with true premises; therefore (iii) “*p*” is true—obviously launches a vicious regress. My understanding itself constitutes a basic right to believe that *p* through its essential involvement of my knowledge how, given the truth of the premises, I am right in doing so.¹⁷

Similarly in perception, with veridical egocentric spatial experience playing the role of adequate intelligent understanding in deduction. (Non-veridical experience is in this way parallel to honest misunderstanding, or inadequate grasp of the relevant concepts; for example, in a complex mathematical argument in which the conclusion therefore *seems* to follow, when in fact it does not.)¹⁸ When I look around me and recognize what I see, I (normally) judge that things are thus and so. Again this is quite different from any

blind manipulation of my beliefs by the world. For I know how I am right. Yet this is not because I have a further true belief that my experience is veridical, which might just be a blind hunch. Nor is there any reflective subsumption of the experience under my independent knowledge of the general reliability of perception. Such a requirement cannot be met without circularity or regress. My experience itself constitutes a basic right to believe that things are thus and so through its essential involvement of my knowledge how I am thereby right about the world around me.

In both successful deduction and veridical perception, the way I acquire true beliefs itself informs me how I am right, immediately and non-inferentially satisfying the internalist requirement on knowledge. Admitting that I have no skeptic-proof *guarantee* of truth, in either case, is simply accepting the obvious fallibility of our attempts at deduction and perception, and could hardly constitute an objection to my view.¹⁹

V. CONCLUSION

The epistemological standing of perception is not exhausted by the fact that it is a reliable source of much of our information about the way things are in the world around us. It depends upon the further fact that in being so informed we know how we are right. This should not be construed as a dependence of our knowledge about the world upon our infallible access to mere appearances, from which the likely constitution of an external world is supposed to be derived by some kind of inference. It consists rather in the fact that the egocentric spatial content of perception displays the physical world itself as accessible to us in that very experience. In perceiving things to be thus and so we know how we are right about the way they are: i.e. in virtue of their spatial relations with us, which

enable our perception of them. Perception of the world around us therefore constitutes an epistemologically direct apprehension of the way things are out there.²⁰

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NOTES

- 1 Particular versions of reliabilism must specify (a) which beliefs are suitably similar in content; (b) how ways of acquiring beliefs are to be individuated; and (c) which are the relevant non-actual possible worlds.
- 2 This formulation is intended as a placeholder for a basic internalist intuition, the correct explication of which emerges as I explain how I think it is satisfied.
- 3 This worry was raised by an *APQ* referee.
- 4 This argument is developed in detail, placing my position more carefully in the context of traditional versions of foundationalism and coherentism, in Brewer 1996.
- 5 Brewer 1992 aims to establish the connection between self-locating egocentric spatial content and the control and coordination of basic spatial action, but neglects the importance of a perceiver's grasp of the impact of things on him in experience, which is crucial to the present discussion. A relational conception of perceptual information, as presenting the possibilities for mutual interaction between subject and objects is a major theme of J. J. Gibson (1966; and esp. 1979), enshrined in the dictum: "To perceive the world is to coperceive oneself" (1979, p. 126). The philosophical importance of this view has been brought home to me by Naomi Eilan, in her (forthcoming) theory of perceptual consciousness. Its epistemological dimension is suggested by Michael Ayers' (1991, esp. chs. 15 & 21) development of Locke's (1975, IV.ii.14 and IV.xi) account of "sensitive knowledge."
- 6 See my discussion of imagination in section 4.1 below.
- 7 Again, this worry was raised by an *APQ* referee.
- 8 This view of sense is derived from Evans (1982, pp. 20 ff; 1985b, esp. pp. 301 ff.).
- 9 For further discussion of this idea of a single, cross-modally integrated egocentric spatial frame of reference for perception and action, see Evans, 1985a; Ayers, 1991, ch. 21; Peacocke, 1992, ch. 3; Brewer, 1993; Eilan, 1993 and forthcoming; Driver, 1994 and forthcoming; and Campbell, forthcoming. Its antecedents can be found in the phenomenological tradition. See

especially Bell, 1990, ch. 4 (on Husserl); and Merleau-Ponty, 1962. For discussion of the nature and importance of bodily awareness in this connection, see O'Shaughnessy, 1980, pt. II; and Bermudez, Marcel and Eilan, 1995.

10 Interestingly, he argues in favor of a precisely parallel "intuition" of the truth in his (1985, App. A, esp. pp. 207 ff.) discussion of a priori knowledge.

11 See Lucas, 1955, for a related defence of what he calls "singular reasons," combining genuine normativity with the absence of subsumption under any universal principle.

12 These objections are due to Michael Ayers and Bill Child respectively. I am grateful to an *APQ* referee for pushing me to develop my responses more fully, especially to the second objection.

13 See my discussion above of the integrated, cross-modal nature of a normal egocentric perceptual perspective, for an account of how such direct contradiction is possible between different sensory modalities.

14 Having noted this contrast, I should emphasize that it is not easy to make sense of the idea of a bare visual point of view, say, other than as a partial component of some actual or possible integrated sensory presentation of the world around a person. For example, the up/down, back/front and left/right orientation of a visual point of view are not settled simply by selecting the point from which the world is to be viewed. They depend crucially upon taking up, actually or in imagination, the total and integrated cross-modal perspective of a person at that point.

15 I mean "passive" here only in the sense that perception itself is not a voluntary action. Clearly what one perceives depends a good deal upon what one does. Perception also consists in more than mere receptivity, in that the mind makes some contribution to the content of sensory experience. See Ayers, 1970, for a helpful discussion of the passivity of perception.

16 This point raises issues which go well beyond the scope of the present paper. The essential abnormality of such cases rests upon the role in the determination of perceptual content of the actual items to which a person's experiences are normally a response.

17 For related discussions of the epistemology of deduction, see Carroll, 1895; Stroud, 1979; Ayers, 1991, chs. 29, 31 & 32; Dummett, 1991a, ch. 4, and 1991b, chs. 4, 9 & 15.

18 I am aware that this suggestion raises serious issues in connection with a theoretical analogue of the debate over internal and external reasons for action, as presented by Williams (1980); and recently rejoined by McDowell (1995) and Williams (1995, pp. 186-194). I have neither the space nor the ability right now satisfactorily to pursue the argument all the way through this very complex area.

19 Their fallibility must be stated with care. Something I cannot infallibly distinguish from a deduction might involve a subtle fallacy; and something I cannot infallibly distinguish from perception might be a convincing illusion. Both "deduction" and "perception" are success terms, though: nothing correctly so-called could be in error.

20 Many thanks to John Campbell, Quassim Cassam, David Charles, Ernest Sosa, Bob Frazier, Bob Hargrave, John Kenyon, Penny Mackie, Helen Steward, Rowland Stout, Ralph Walker and Tim Williamson for their comments on earlier versions of this material. I am especially grateful to Bill Child for his reply at the Oxford University Philosophical Society, and to Michael Ayers for his detailed written comments on the final two drafts. Comments from an anonymous referee for the *American Philosophical Quarterly* were extremely helpful in shaping my final revisions.