

Bill Brewer

Perception and its Objects.

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In this focused and carefully argued book, Bill Brewer develops and defends the *Object View* (OV), a version of direct realism. Brewer appropriates for his foundational concept what he considers to be a key insight of the early modern tradition: perceptual experience is *an irreducibly relational act of direct acquaintance, the direct object of which constitutes the fundamental nature of experience*. While many of the early moderns held—partly as a consequence of the arguments from hallucination and illusion—that the direct objects were always *mind-dependent*, the core claim of OV is that the direct objects of non-hallucinatory perceptual experiences are *mind-independent physical* objects. After some stage setting (chapter 1), Brewer argues against competing theories of perception (chapters 2–4) and then defends OV against the arguments from illusion and hallucination, addresses the role of perceptual experience in grounding empirical knowledge, and discusses the way in which the objects of awareness acquire status *as* mind-independent within an individual's experience (chapters 5–7).

Brewer argues that competing theories of perception fail to satisfy adequately one of two 'empirical realist' desiderata. The first of these is that physical objects have a nature that is *independent* of our perceptions of them and are the *fundamental explanations* of the actual and counterfactual nature of our perceptions of them. Idealists and other anti-realists, by making physical objects to be constituted in some way by these mind-dependent objects, require that the ultimate explanation of our experiences of them be God (as Berkeley thought) or some unknowable mind-independent reality rather than the perceived physical objects.

The second empirical realist desideratum is that mind-independent physical objects are the very objects *presented* to us in such experiences, which minimally requires conveying a positive conception of the intrinsic character of such objects. Classical indirect realism and contemporary intentional content theories fail in different ways to satisfy this constraint. Indirect realists, by characterizing our perceptions of physical objects in terms of direct acquaintance with mind-dependent objects, are not able to offer a positive conception of physical objects. Rather, they leave us with, at most, a conception of physical objects as being merely the typical causes of our experiences of them. Consequently, perception cannot be said, in any meaningful way, to be presentational. Contemporary intentional content theories eschew altogether the notion of acquaintance, but by making perception, at its most fundamental level, to be a *representational state*—modeled after cognitive states like thought and belief—they do not allow for the *particularity* of perceptual experience due to the ineliminable generality to be found even at the most fundamental representational level. The truth conditions of the content *x is F* could be satisfied by other objects qualitatively different from the one that is perceived, so it is difficult to say that the perceived *object* is genuinely presented in experience. Brewer's criticisms of the intentionalist theories are extensive and incisive. Future defenses of the view will need to grapple with his arguments.

Brewer argues next that an adequate direct realist response to the arguments from hallucination and illusion requires modifying the acquaintance conception of experience. The challenge for Brewer is to modify it in such a way that the resulting account sufficiently resembles the early modern conception that he takes as his starting point and which provides some initial plausibility for OV. One may reasonably worry that Brewer does not meet this challenge.

First, in response to the argument from hallucination, Brewer denies that there is *any* direct object in hallucinatory experiences, either a mind-dependent or a mind-independent one. Brewer articulates a version of what has come to be known as the *disjunctivist* account of experience. Visual experience is a disjunctive concept, being *either* a good case of being directly acquainted with a physical object *or* a bad case of merely being in a state that can be most fundamentally characterized as being *introspectively indistinguishable by reflection alone* from good cases. If such a disjunctive account of experience can be justified, this would provide a way of denying that hallucinatory and veridical experiences are the same metaphysically merely because they are indistinguishable subjectively. However, a significant implication of adopting such a disjunctive account is that, setting aside the status of the object as either mind-dependent or mind-independent, the subject cannot tell from the first-person perspective whether or not she is even acquainted with *anything*. This is a marked departure from the early modern conception, which gives more authority to first-person introspection in determining the intrinsic nature of one's own mental states.

Second, while the early modern conception of acquaintance is of a *two-term* relation (experiencing subject and direct object), in response to the argument from illusion, Brewer makes it a *three-term* relation by incorporating as a third relatum some of the circumstances involved in perception including the point of view. It is commonplace to recognize that circumstances contribute *causally* to how things look. Brewer's claim is about the *metaphysical* structure of experience, an underappreciated consequence of which is that the direct object now only *partially* constitutes the 'most basic categorization' of experience. Seeing a round coin straight on rather than from an oblique angle is just as much a part of the nature of the experience as is the coin itself.

A further consequence of this modification is the rejection of the early moderns' conviction that one was acquainted with something that is *F* if and only if it looked *F*. Brewer denies that acquaintance requires accepting this claim, but he provides no argument against it except to point to his three-term relation as a way retaining acquaintance independent of such a restriction. In fact, by claiming, as he seems to, that the *phenomenal character* of experience is *constituted* in part by these circumstantial factors, Brewer's modification goes beyond merely denying this restrictive claim. Not only can direct objects look other than they are, how things look is constituted partially by factors other than the object. Indeed, the phenomenal character of some experiences may be determined *as much or more* by associated circumstances as by features of direct objects. Now, an attractive reason for accepting in the first place an acquaintance conception of experience and the view that direct objects 'provide the most basic categorization of experience' is the phenomenological datum that features of direct objects are *all that are constitutive* of how things look. Consequently, Brewer should provide some

additional argument to motivate this modification, given the dialectical prominence of the early modern conception in Brewer's discussion.

A closely related consequence is a slackening of the connection between the phenomenal character of experience and the *intrinsic qualities* of direct objects. This emerges most clearly in his discussion of *visually relevant similarities*. Two objects are said to be visually relevantly similar if they would generate similar responses in a perceiver's visual system in virtue of their respective physical characteristics and the respective circumstances in which they are seen. Though Brewer does not quite put it this way, similarity in response must inevitably refer to *phenomenological similarity*. Building on this, something is said to *look F* to us when what we perceive looks the way that paradigmatically *F* objects would look in ordinary circumstances, where paradigm instances of *F* are those that are essential to our understanding of *F*. Illusions, then, are merely cases in which, given the joint contribution of the object and the circumstances to the phenomenal character of the experience, an object *looks* the way paradigmatically *F* objects look while it is not itself an *F*. A white ball in red lighting conditions looks red because it looks the way paradigmatic red objects look in ordinary conditions. A straight stick halfway submerged in water looks crooked because it looks the way paradigmatic crooked objects look in ordinary conditions.

Brewer suggests that statements about how an object looks are *relative to* either the paradigms of the perceiver or those of the ascriber. However, if statements about illusory experience *merely describe* such experiences relative to some paradigm, the distinction between veridical and illusory experience appears now to be merely a conventional one. Illusions are no longer understood as experiences that fail to disclose the intrinsic qualities of physical objects. Indeed, the view that seems to emerge from much of Brewer's discussion is that there is no way that an object *should* appear, *independent* of circumstances and visually relevant similarities to paradigms. Consequently, there is no way of viewing an object that reveals its intrinsic properties better than another. In a way, *every* experience ends up being illusory relative to some paradigm. A red object in ordinary circumstances has visually relevant similarities with paradigms of white objects viewed in red lighting conditions. Consequently, red objects seen in ordinary circumstances look both veridically red and non-veridically white-in-red-light. Likewise, crooked sticks look both veridically crooked and non-veridically straight-stick-in-water.

Setting aside the concern that OV is insufficiently continuous with the early modern conception of acquaintance, Brewer's book is well worth reading for his extensive development of an original form of direct realism and of the relevance of such a view to related epistemological and phenomenological matters. Also of note are several important objections he raises against alternative theories of perception.

Kenneth Hobson
Iowa State University