

## James on Experience and the Extended Mind

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William James's characterization of consciousness as a selecting agency can be used to develop and defend an externalist view of mind. The mind – including the content of phenomenal consciousness – is in an important sense distributed beyond the skin and skull of the subject, out into the world of people and things. Moreover, conscious experience is an action, and not simply something that happens to us. Consciousness, perception, and experience are activities – in other words, things that we do.

### 1. Introduction

James's characterization of consciousness as a "selecting agency" can be used to develop and defend an externalist view of the phenomenal content of experience. An externalist view of phenomenal content urges that not all mental phenomena are localized inside the head of the conscious subject. In a very real sense, the mind is extended beyond the skin and skull, out into the world of people and things. I will argue that this model of the extended mind is coextensive with James's insistence that experience is not something that simply happens to us, but rather something that we do. Conscious experience is thus an action. Furthermore, perception and action are not discrete processes but rather thoroughly integrated and mutually-informing occurrences. In this sense, then, experience is a construction – something that we very literally create through our embodied engagement with the world – and not merely an inner re-construction of the world via the activation and assemblage of internal representations. This article proceeds as follows. I begin with some definitions. Next, I look at a recent internalist view of phenomenal content. I then discuss James on consciousness. Finally, I conclude by developing an externalist view of phenomenal content which draws upon two key aspects of James's characterization of consciousness.

### 2. Definitions

First, some definitions. Internalism, as I use the term, is the view that mental states are internal and autonomous. In other words, mental states and their

content are independent of the surrounding world. This is because internal states fix the content of beliefs and experiences. Thus all mental events, states, and processes occur inside the skin and skull of the individual who has them. There is no necessary constitutive relation between an individual's mental states and their environment. (Internalists can deny a constitutive relation between mind and world while still conceding some sort of causal relation.) Stated thusly, there are two central commitments of this internalist view that pragmatic externalism denies: (1) the location claim, and (2) the ontological claim. The location claim is the claim that all mental particulars are exclusively spatially located inside the skin and skull of the subject who has them. Connectedly, the ontological claim is an identity claim: the claim that mental particulars are constituted by particulars exclusively located inside the head subject.

Externalism denies both (1) and (2). The pragmatic externalism defended here claims to the contrary that the mind is (at least partially) external to the head. Via our active probing and manipulation of the world, mentality is distributed beyond the skin and skull, out into the world of people and things. Thus, not only is there a causal relation between mind and world. More strongly, there is also a necessary, constitutive relation between (at least some) of an individual's mental states and their environment. Not all mental phenomena are inside the head of the conscious subject. Rather, mental content is not in principle independent of the world and autonomous but rather context-dependent. In short, pragmatic externalism claims that mentality is both inside and outside of the head, and that mental particulars are not simply caused but, more radically, sometimes constituted by the world and the things in it. By labeling this form of externalism "pragmatic," I am emphasizing the enactive, content-constituting role that action plays in constructing phenomenal experience.

### 3. Internalism and Phenomenal Content

I now look briefly at an internalist account of phenomenal content. In his recent book *Knowledge, Possibility, and Consciousness*, John Perry (2001) argues for what he terms "antecedent physicalism." This is essentially the view that, until a better option is shown to the case, or physicalism is shown to entail contradictions, incoherencies, or distortions of our commonsense descriptions of experience, the individual antecedently committed to physicalism need not abandon this view (Perry 2001, 28). Perry establishes his position by defending the central claims of antecedent physicalism from several common qualia-friendly, antiphysicalist arguments (such as the zombie argument, to name one). Of interest to the present discussion is Perry's following claim: "It seems pretty clear ... that the subjective character of a mental state is not a historical or contextual property of it. It is a property determined by current inner events." (Perry 2001, 44). He later continues: "The states of our body, often

carrying information about the external world, put our brains in states it is like something to be in. Amazing, but true.” (Perry 2001, 46). Thus, to account for the phenomenal character of my visual experience of an apple, for instance, I need to tell a story about how “my perception of an apple is caused by events in my eyes and the optic nerve, themselves caused by external light and apples” (Perry 2001, 37). Physiological, causal analysis of inner brain and body states is therefore sufficient to give us ontological-constitutive explanation of the subjective character of experience.

For Perry, then, the subjective character of mental states is ultimately type-identical to internal states. External things may cause subjective experiences. However, the subjective character of experience is not constituted by external things or properties, but rather “inner events” in the brain and central nervous system. Thus Perry endorses both the location and the ontological claims of internalism as laid out above. Moreover, this internalist bias is for Perry an unargued for assumption, “pretty clear” enough to not require some sort of developed defense.

I think Perry’s account here is wrong for several reasons. Using some of James’s insights, I’d now like to say more precisely why this is so. First, however, I’ll examine James’s view of consciousness.

#### **4. James on Consciousness**

There are two distinctive characterizations of consciousness offered by James that serve as the basis for the pragmatic externalist account of phenomenal consciousness developed below. According to James, consciousness is both (1) an external functional relation, and (2) a selecting agency.

First, James characterizes consciousness as an external functional relation. In “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” James famously answers the question posed by the title of the essay in the negative. More precisely, James denies that consciousness exists as a substance or entity – some sort of ethereal mind-stuff over against the things and relations of the physical world. However, James insists “most emphatically that [consciousness] does stand for a function” (James 1996, 3), and furthermore that “that function is knowing” (1996, 4). Later in the same essay, James continues: “consciousness connotes a kind of external relation, and does not denote a special stuff or way of being” (James 1996, 25).

The ontological import of this passage is clear: consciousness is not a “special” Cartesian substance. But what of the positive characterization of consciousness as “a kind of external relation”? This somewhat mysterious attribution can be made clearer when we recall that James affirms a kind of naïve realism about perceptual content. Naïve realism, or what is now more commonly referred to as the “theory of direct perception,” is simply the claim that, in experience via any sensory modality, we have immediate and non-inferential awareness of the objects or states of affairs that we take ourselves to

be experiencing. In other words, theories of direct perception deny the existence of any sort of intramental intermediaries – representations, sense data, ideas, impressions, and the like – that serve as the true objects of experience. Again, the claim is that we have direct access to things in the world through our experiences of them. And thus the content of our phenomenal experiences of things and states of affairs is simply the things and states of affairs themselves. James says just this when he writes that perception “is a kind of knowledge ... in which the mind enjoys direct ‘acquaintance’ with a present object” (James 1996, 54).

How does this clarify James’s characterization of consciousness as an external functional relation? First, James is clearly denying that consciousness is a monadic predicate or property. Rather, James is instead arguing that consciousness is a relational property or function constituted by its “hooking up” with things and states of affairs in the world. To encapsulate James’s thought here in a formula, we might say the following: For James, consciousness is not a substance but rather a structure. And as a structure – as the mechanism by which we have direct access to the objects of experience – consciousness is enacted in and through our experiential engagement with the world and the things in it. This characterization is a bit vague, but it will have to do for the moment.

However, an important clarification is needed: When James speaks of consciousness as a “functional” relation, we must be careful not to assume that this term has the same significance for James that it does for contemporary theorists who endorse functionalist accounts of consciousness. According to the latter, mental states are individuated not by their intrinsic properties (such as the phenomenal feel of viewing a sunset, sipping a single malt scotch, or working out a logical proof) but rather by their functional or causal relations: relations to stimulus inputs, other internal states, and behavioral outputs. These relational properties are what individuate all mental states as being the sort of states that they are. Crudely put: a physical system (such as the brain and central nervous system) takes in a physical input, runs it through a sequence of internal cause-and-effect relations, and then produces a physical output. Under this rendering, mental states are thus functional or computational states. The salient point here is that there are no intrinsic phenomenal properties of consciousness, according to this functionalist line.

James shares contemporary functionalism’s relational portrayal of consciousness. But contra functionalism, James does want to insist upon (at least one) intrinsic property of phenomenal consciousness, as we’ll see below. As a preview, I’ll simply note that this intrinsic property of phenomenal consciousness is an implicit bodily self-awareness. But again, while implicit bodily self-awareness is an intrinsic feature of phenomenal states, it is also a relational property constituted, at least in part, by external sensorimotor relations with things in the world. James is much too phenomenologically sensitive to go all the way with his “functional” portrayal and allow the subjective character of

experience to become epiphenomenally extraneous. (This, of course, is precisely the criticism of contemporary functionalism levied by thinkers such as Searle, Block, and Shoemaker, as well as many from within the phenomenological tradition.)

To summarize, consciousness, for James, is not a substance but a structure. It is an external functional relation constituted by our worldly engagement.

Next, James characterizes consciousness as a selecting agency. This is perhaps his most substantive positive portrayal of consciousness. It is also this characterization of consciousness which further clarifies what James means by portraying consciousness as an external functional relation. To understand James's point, we must first look at his insistence on the interdependence of activity and experience. In "The Experience of Activity," James defines activity, construed as broadly as possible, as "the sense of life" (James 1977, 280). James then insists that the experience of activity is a basic constituent of "our own subjective life" (James 1977, 280). Our self-awareness of our agency, prior to reflective self-awareness of ourselves as bare cognizers, is an invariant structural feature of our subjectivity, our phenomenal experience of the world. According to James, there is thus an irreducible interrelation between agency and experience. In an important sense, agency (activity both realized and implicitly recognized as possible) structures or determines experience. Insofar as I am aware of myself, according to James, I am aware of myself as a locus of possible creative activity.

But this somewhat vague construal requires refinement. James offers this refinement when he continues by saying that all activity "comes with definite direction ... with desire and sense of goal" (James 1977, 281). Agency structures experience, and experience is always "shot through" with selective interests and goals respective to the agent. This teleological conception of experience is an entailment of his earlier well-known claim, running throughout *The Principles of Psychology*, that "consciousness is at all times primarily a selecting agency" (James 1950, v. 1, 142). Thus, consciousness is always interested more in one part of its object than in another, and welcomes and rejects, or chooses, all the while it thinks (James 1950, v. 1, 273).

Importantly, the selective function of consciousness structures the phenomenal field of perceptual experience. James's point here is not simply the claim that objects of consciousness always present themselves aspectually. This weaker "aspectual" claim is summed up as follows: I never see the apple on my kitchen table in its totality, for instance, but only certain aspects or profiles relative to my embodied spatial relationship to the apple. Certainly James would concede this simple point about the aspectual nature of perception. However, by characterizing consciousness as a selecting agency, James is making a broader and ultimately stronger point: consciousness very literally structures its world of experience. By accentuating and emphasizing certain objects and aspects as they make themselves present to us within the

total field of experience – and thus simultaneously excluding or overlooking others – we literally reconfigure our phenomenal field of experience in a way that reflects these individual accentuations and emphases. As opposed to internalist renderings of phenomenal experience, under which an external world presses itself onto the mind-as-passive recipient of sensible input, James instead insists here on the world-directed activity of consciousness. Only by insisting that phenomenal experience is an action can we accommodate “so patent a fact as the perceptual presence of selective attention” (James 1950, v. 1, 402, emphasis mine).

Some examples will help clarify James’s claim here. After receiving an especially unflattering haircut, I am suddenly acutely aware the following day of the haircuts of my students and the people I encounter on the street – all of whom seem to have somehow escaped the indignity of receiving a haircut similar to my own. This is not to say that I don’t normally experience others’ haircuts. But after a bad haircut, others’ haircuts are suddenly foregrounded in my experience, with a vividness and persistency, which is not normally the case. I notice almost nothing but others’ haircuts.

This experience is also replicated in other more pleasant contexts: for example, when one’s beloved suddenly enters the restaurant, looking especially fetching that evening. The upshot of this is that the phenomenal field is malleable. I can reconfigure it by accentuating certain features while de-emphasizing others. As a selecting agency, consciousness fixes onto phenomenal saliences relevant to the agent’s interests and ends that temporarily mask or occlude other features of the same field of experience. An overgrown backyard in need of a mow for the philosopher becomes a circus of floral fascinations, blooming and buzzing with myriad saliences under the gaze of the trained botanist. Similarly, the basketball court alights with dynamic lines and vectors of possible action and creative expression for the professional basketball player in a way that makes the cold geometry of the philosopher’s court appear radically impoverished. Consciousness, as a selecting agency, actively structures its phenomenal field. This is its functional significance.

However, it must be immediately noted that James is not advocating an idealist position, wherein consciousness literally creates the objects that it experiences. Again, James affirms a theory of direct perception. There is a world of real things, for James, and we have unmediated access to it. Recall his earlier comment to this effect. However, our individual interests and goals – coupled with embodied agency, our active engagement with the world – configure how we access this world, and how the phenomenal content of our experience presents itself to us in our experience of the world.

Consciousness, for James, is not a substance but a structure. It is an external functional relation constituted by our worldly engagement. Additionally, consciousness is a selecting agency. Through our active engagement with the world, we construct our field of phenomenal experience. Embodied agency determines phenomenal content.

### **5. Bodily Self-Awareness, Actional Capacities, and Externalism about Phenomenal Content**

I here develop James's characterization of consciousness as discussed above and put together a pragmatic externalist account of phenomenal content. I will also bring Merleau-Ponty into the discussion, as his views are remarkably consonant with James on a number of relevant points. I proceed in this manner: First, I contend that there are two features of James's characterization of consciousness which illuminate essential features of phenomenal experience ignored by Perry's internalist rendering: (1) implicit bodily self-awareness, and (2) implicit awareness of the body's basic sensorimotor capacities. (2) is parasitic upon (1). Secondly, these two features point to the way that the subjective character of experience is constituted (at least in part) externally. I discuss these features and their externalist implications below. I do so by arguing that these features of experience help account for two puzzles of perception: first, the puzzle of the phenomenal presence of absence, or The Problem of Absent Aspects; second, the puzzle of perceptual constancy.

I start with the Problem of Absent Aspects. To begin with a visual example: solid opaque objects are seen aspectually. To use Perry's example, I only see one side (or aspect) of an apple and not the other side (or aspect). No solid opaque object is seen in its entirety. Certainly, there is nothing controversial about this basic fact about the necessarily perspectival nature of experience. Things quickly get more complicated, however. For we also experience (though we don't strictly speaking see) the "hidden" sides or aspects of solid opaque objects (Noë 2004).

The visual absence of these occluded sides is nonetheless perceptually present in my experience of the apple in its lush red density and fruity roundness. Similarly, I somehow see a plate on its side as both circular and elliptical. When I see a dog standing behind a picket fence, I experience not only the parts of the dog I see amidst the slats of the fence, but I experience the dog in his fluffy canine fullness (including the "hidden" parts of Rover occluded by the fence slats). These sorts of observations clarify the import of Merleau-Ponty's mysterious remark that "we must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon" (1962, 7). But the question remains: how is this "positive" experience of indeterminateness phenomenally possible? How do we perceive absent aspects?

First, it's not a matter of representing the outer world via inner "ideas," as Perry refers to individual representations of things, places, and properties (Perry 2001, 44). For, strictly speaking, I only represent (or in Perry's terminology, have an idea of) the part of the apple facing me or the elliptical shape of a plate on its side or the bits of Rover not hidden by the fence. But again, the hidden bits of objects are very much in my experience of them. Representational theories of perception flounder in their attempts to account for the phenomenal presence of these hidden bits. But by fleshing out the

subjective character of experience with the structural features of consciousness introduced above – again, (1) implicit bodily self-awareness, and (2) implicit understanding of the body’s sensorimotor capacities – we can discern how phenomenal content can simultaneously include both the “presence” and “absence” of the sort discussed above. I’d like to look at these features more closely.

(1) The subjective character of experience includes an implicit bodily self-awareness. This is an implicit self-awareness of my body as standing in a determinate spatial relation to the object of experience. This perspectival aspect of the content of my experience is determined both by where I am in relation to the object of my experience and where I could possibly be, if I decide to take three steps to the left, for instance. But this relation to the objects of my experience – a spatial relation – is determined by my bodily relation to these objects. For example, the direction of the sound of a car suddenly backfiring is specified in relation to my body, and I become aware of it as “slightly behind me and to my left”; the apple is seen as “directly in front of me.” This spatial relationship is not geometrical space, but rather a lived or bodily space: live connections to the world and the things in it. And this perspectival self-awareness is a bodily self-awareness that is operative without conceptual or reflective articulation. Every situation I come into automatically organizes itself around my body as the locus of my agency. In a footnote to “The Experience of Activity,” James sums up this idea in the following manner:

The world experienced (otherwise called the ‘field of consciousness’) comes at all times with our body as its centre, centre of vision, centre of action, centre of interest. Where the body is is ‘here’; when the body acts is ‘now’; what the body touches is ‘this’; all other things are ‘there’ and ‘then’ and ‘that’. These words of emphasized position imply a systematization of things with reference to a focus of action and interest which lies in the body... The body is the storm centre, the origin of co-ordinates, the constant place of stress in all that experience-train. Everything circles round it, and is felt from its point of view. (James 1977, 283, fn. 180).

The orientational structure of my perceptual field always harbors an implicit self-referentiality to the embodied perspective I take on the world and the experiences I have of the things in it from this embodied perspective. The content of my experience is coupled to the fact of my embodied agency. Importantly, this bodily self-referentiality is not equivalent to a higher-order cognitive self-reflexivity, however, but is in fact more phenomenologically basic. It gives itself immediately, without reflective thought.

Even closing my eyes and pondering a logical proof in the dark involves an implicit self-awareness that I am closing my eyes and pondering a logical

proof in an “activity-situation,” as James refers to it. The latter is defined as the environment surrounding my body, arranged in relation to my self-awareness of my body as standing in certain relationships to things comprising that situation: the chair I’m sitting on, the desk in front of me, the sleeping dog lying behind me and slightly to the left on the floor. Every activity-situation is thus structurally determined by my bodily orientation as a persistent “frame” of experience. In every experience, I implicitly recognized my body as here. Echoing James, Merleau-Ponty says that this bodily here refers not “to a determinate position in relation to other positions of external coordinates, but the laying down of first coordinates, the anchoring of my body to an object, the situation of the body in the face of its tasks.” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 115)

But this bodily self-awareness – an intrinsic feature of experience – is only constituted by my bodily relation to external things, not inner mental representations or alterations of a neural substrate. It is to objects in the world to which my body becomes “anchored,” and around which situations bloom into possibilities for action and response. Thus this bodily self-awareness is an “inner” structural feature of every experience that nonetheless is “externally” constituted by spatial relationships (relative to my body) outside of whatever is going on in my head. This aspect of the subjective character of experience is not wholly reducible to inner events. It is a relational property that requires the world and the things in it as *relata*.

(2) Next, the subjective character of experience also includes an implicit understanding of the body’s sensorimotor capacities. According to James, this is an awareness of the body as a “center of action.” Similarly, Merleau-Ponty argues that it is our bodily motility, our basic sensorimotor capacities for action, that generate whatever meaning the lived world has. Thus he writes, in a remark that James would surely endorse, that our experience of the world is not “in the first place a matter of ‘I think that’; but of ‘I can’” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 159).

This implicit recognition of the world as a field of “I cans” is parasitic upon (1): our implicit bodily self-awareness. The “situation” in which I always find myself is experienced as a field of activity and affectivity. My body, and the perspective I take on a situation, opens up vectors or lines of possible action: possibilities of locomotion, navigation, manipulation, etc. These “I can” possibilities are opened up in virtue of (1). But (2) enters the picture because I implicitly understand that, as embodied, I can pick up the apple and view the other side. I know that I can assume a different vantage point on the plate, which looks elliptical from here, and see it as circular from there. I can walk around the fence and see Rover in his fluffy canine fullness. I can crane my neck, squint, back up, or move forward to get a better view of or handle on things. I experience both the presence and absence of partially occluded objects in virtue of my implicit awareness that I can potentially assume different perspectives on them, perspectives which will make present that which is currently hidden. This is an implicit understanding of the body’s sensorimotor

capacities, a kind of proprioceptive or actional self-awareness. But this proprioceptive action-awareness, which is an intrinsic feature of the subjective character of experience, is again relationally determined by properties and things out there, in the situation in which I find myself.

Thus, the ontological-constitutive significance of this feature of experience challenges Perry's internalist picture. Once more, the subjective character of experience is (at least partially) driven and constituted by the external environment. Therefore, Perry's internalist rendering of phenomenal content remains inadequate, so long as it excludes these structural features of experience. Unlike the pragmatic externalism of James, Perry's view cannot provide a satisfactory resolution to the Problem of Absent Aspects.

So what about the puzzle of "perceptual constancy" mentioned earlier?<sup>1</sup> This puzzle concerns another basic fact about experience: namely, the constancy of a perceptual object throughout variations in perceptual content. Another example will help here. When I have a visual experience of an apple, the redness of the apple is, properly speaking, one of the objects of my perception. Even a young child who has learned the ability to give color reports will identify an apple as red. But the puzzle of perceptual constancy arises from the fact that the apple I see is not uniformly red. Rather, I experience the redness as somehow a uniform constant behind the shadows, texture variations, and skin discolorations that I see, and which break up the apple's redness in my seeing it. When I move around the apple, the play of light and shadow changes the redness of the apple I see respective to my current position and ambient light sources. Once more, though, I still experience the redness of the apple-as-perceptual-object to be stable and constant – despite the fact that the content of my perception of the apple-as-seen consists of shadows and texture variations that render an uneven redness. How is this so?

Once more, it is not simply a matter of Perry's inner "ideas." A causal-physiological story about light refraction, retinal images, and other inner events in the eyes and optic nerve tells us only about the seeing: again, the seeing of an uneven redness. The simultaneous experience of perceptual constancy (the uniform redness of the apple) remains mysterious. But the second feature of consciousness experience discussed above – again, an implicit awareness of the body's sensorimotor capacities – can explain this puzzle. Here's how. First, the embodied approach to experience I am here arguing for insists that objects, as experienced, are always experienced in their entirety. (This was one of the central points of the Problem of the Absent Aspect, discussed earlier). In other words, I never experience independent properties or features of the object, such as the redness of the apple, somehow divorced from the whole apple itself or detached from the larger context in which the apple is situated. Rather, I experience the apple as a whole, as embedded in a larger context that determines how I experience the apple as a whole. Thus, if the apple is sitting on a windowsill in my kitchen during a sunny afternoon and I stand directly in front of it, I experience the whole apple as red – despite the

fact that I likely see only the frontal aspect of the apple, and likely see it as black (due to intense backlighting). The important idea here is this. I experience the apple as red because I implicitly (i.e. noninferentially) recognize both that certain environmental conditions presently obtain which cause the frontal aspect of the apple to be cast in dark shadow, and furthermore, that I can move to a new location or pick up the apple (or both) and see it in its redness. In other words, I can transform certain environmental conditions, including my bodily-spatial relationship to the apple and subsequently, ambient lighting conditions, that will then afford new experiences of the apple in its redness (or at least, something closer to its redness).

This implicit awareness of possibilities for action and manipulation of my environment, and the subsequent effects these possibilities have on the phenomenal content of my experience, are what Alva Noë (2004) refers to as “sensorimotor contingencies.” At any moment of experience, I have a noninferential bodily “knowledge” of the many sensorimotor contingencies that exist between my body and my lived environment. This is an extension of the implicit bodily-self awareness that James and Merleau-Ponty correctly argue is an invariant structural feature of all experience. Beyond this implicit bodily self-awareness, however, I again have an implicit understanding of the ways in which existing sensorimotor contingencies shape the phenomenal content of my experience, including such features as color, size, shape, and distance. The point can be summed up rather simply. With every experience of the world, I implicitly know that both (1) moving throughout, exploring, and manipulating my world is a possibility, and that (2) actualizing these sensorimotor possibilities will change the way that I experience the world. I thus actively construct the content of my phenomenal experience. Agency determines content.

One final point before concluding. This sensorimotor or enactive view of phenomenal content developed above is a thoroughly externalist one, in that the vehicles of phenomenal content (or, at least some of them) are distributed outside the head. The “vehicles” of mentality are simply the events, states, and processes that carry mental “content,” where the latter are the objects of events, states, and processes. Once more, however, these vehicles are not simply reducible to internal syntactic or neural processes (inner representations, ideas, or neural structures). Rather, the vehicles of content under the view I have developed above involves both bodily-sensorimotor features as well as environmental features. When I perceive the apple on my windowsill, the content of my phenomenal experience is enacted by the various sensorimotor contingencies that I use to engage with the apple itself and the apple’s surrounding environment. The critical point is this: it is the coupling of both my body’s sensorimotor contingencies and the environment itself that serves as the vehicle for my phenomenal experience. In this way, phenomenal experience is constructed within this active coupling. My probing, manipulating, moving about and exploring – as embedded, embodied activities – become the

vehicles by which I enact my experience of the world. The mind is thus extended beyond the head, a living presence in a world of pure experience.

## NOTES

1. I am here indebted to Sean Kelly (1999) and his helpful discussion of “perceptual constancy.”

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