

Knowledge-first perceptual epistemology: A comment on Littlejohn and Millar

David de Bruijn 

University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh,
Pennsylvania, USA

Abstract

According to epistemological disjunctivism (ED), ordinary perceptual experience *ensures* an opportunity for perceptual knowledge. In recent years, two distinct models of this idea have been developed. For Duncan Pritchard (*Epistemological disjunctivism*, 2012, Oxford University Press; *Epistemic angst: Radical skepticism and the groundlessness of our believing*, 2012, Princeton University Press), perception provides distinctly powerful *reasons* for belief. By contrast, Clayton Littlejohn (*Journal of Philosophical Research*, 41, 201; *Knowledge first*, 2017, Oxford University Press; *Normativity: Epistemic and practical*, 2018, Oxford University Press) and Alan Millar (*The nature and value of knowledge: Three investigations*, 2010, Oxford University Press; *Philosophical Issues*, 21, 332) argue for a version of ED in terms of a “knowledge first” program, on which perception directly provides *knowledge*, without relying on antecedent reasons or justification. Specifically, both Littlejohn and Millar argue that “reasons first” ED faces a problematic regress. In this article, I defend “reasons first” ED by arguing that *experience* provides a type of reason that escapes the regress. I also argue that reasons are a fundamental aspect of ED, especially in its anti-skeptical stance.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Suppose you see that the cup before you is green, you thereby know that the cup is green. How does this work? Recently, some philosophers have found it important to emphasize that if your visual experience involves you *seeing* the cup in the ordinary way, then your (appropriately formed) belief is *certain* to be true and to amount to perceptual knowledge. That is, having the visual experience you did is not consistent with, for example, there being no cup before you at all (as there would not be if you were suffering a hallucination). This idea is known as *epistemological disjunctivism* (ED), on account of the fact that it treats the epistemic contributions of ordinary perceptual experiences and hallucinations fundamentally differently.¹

In this article, I will not defend ED. Instead, I will exclusively be concerned with views that share a commitment to ED. My interest will be in how to develop such views in a critical respect. The issue concerns the relation between ED and knowledge-first approaches to epistemology. Knowledge-first epistemology, which holds that epistemology should start from a primitive concept of knowledge rather than analyzing it in terms of concepts such as justification and belief, has gained in popularity ever since its classic defense by Timothy Williamson (Williamson, 2000). However, so far, the idea has found little application in the epistemology of perception. The core question at issue in this article is whether ED should be developed as a perceptual application of a knowledge-first epistemology, as has recently been argued (in distinct ways) by Clayton Littlejohn (2016, 2017, 2018), and Alan Millar (2010, 2011).

In what so far has been the most-discussed version of ED, Duncan Pritchard (2012, 2015) does not present ED as a knowledge-first view. For Pritchard, the core disjunctivist insight is that perception provides the subject with a distinctly powerful type of perceptual justification or reason, “which is both *factive* [...] and *reflectively accessible* to [the subject]” (Pritchard, 2012, p. 13). That is, for Pritchard possessing justification for belief consists in a perceptual experience that ensures the truth of that belief. In recent articles, Clayton Littlejohn and Alan Millar have developed disjunctivist theories of perceptual knowledge that take a contrasting, knowledge-first approach.² While they offer distinct theories of perception (discussed below), Littlejohn and Millar share the idea that ED is not best understood in terms of perception providing the subject with particularly potent *reasons*. Indeed, for Littlejohn and Millar that idea would, to some extent, miss the point of ED. For Littlejohn and Millar, the core mistake in non-disjunctivist views is *precisely* that perceptual experience merely provides a form of *reason* for belief: a type of *justification* that does not yet entail a type of *knowledge*. Instead, both Littlejohn and Millar think that what perception provides is knowledge *sans phrase*, without resting on a foundation of reasons.

In this article, I will oppose Littlejohn's and Millar's development of ED. My argument will turn on the role of *experience* in perceptual epistemology. On the one hand, Littlejohn and Millar base their view on a regress argument that, I will argue, does not take seriously the distinct way in which experience contributes to perceptual knowledge. On the other hand, I will argue that the move proposed by Littlejohn and Millar is at variance with a core aspect of epistemological disjunctivism, that is, the type of internalism describing the type of rational position from which perceptual knowledge ensues. Abandoning the idea that perceptual knowledge rests on grounds is, therefore, both unnecessary and undesirable.

¹As opposed to, for example, in terms of their metaphysical character.

²Millar explicitly develops a version of disjunctivism at Millar 2008; Littlejohn does not, as far as I can tell, explicitly adopt the position, but it is a clear consequence of the view in Littlejohn (2017,2018).

I will proceed as follows. Section 2 introduces the distinction between reasons-first and knowledge-first ED. Section 3 sketches the regress argument as it occurs in the study of Littlejohn and in the study of Millar. In Section 4, I argue that knowledge-first ED, as spelled out by Littlejohn and Millar, misses out on a critical part of the ambitions of ED. Section 5, finally, introduces the experiential conception of perceptual reasons, which avoids the regress and allows for a more satisfying reasons-first version of ED. In Section 6, I consider objections and conclude.

2 | DISJUNCTIVISM: ‘REASONS-FIRST’ AND ‘KNOWLEDGE-FIRST’

For epistemological disjunctivists, ordinary perceptual judgments are guaranteed to be knowledgeable. In his recent treatment, Clayton Littlejohn (2018) distinguishes two ways of developing a disjunctivist perceptual epistemology: one version that maintains a traditional justification-based model, which Littlejohn dubs the “reasons-first” approach, and the other that constitutes a species of knowledge-first epistemology. Since the reasons-first version of the view is the classic development, I will treat it here relatively briefly. On the reasons-first version of the view, perception provides reasons that entail the truth of corresponding beliefs.³ An example of such a reason might be that the subject believes that *p* because she *sees that p* (McDowell, 2018, p. 91; Pritchard, 2012, p. 14). In Littlejohn’s vocabulary, epistemological disjunctivism on this development is a reasons-first view since, Pritchard argues, the view accords a certain conceptual priority of reasons in explaining perceptual knowledge: perception is guaranteed to provide knowledge because the reasons it provides are truth-entailing. As Littlejohn writes, “According to the reasons-first approach to epistemic status, reasons and the possessions of them are prior to [positive epistemic] status” (Littlejohn, 2017, p. 19).

In contrast to reasons-first ED stands knowledge-first ED. The general idea in this knowledge-first version is that perceptual beliefs are knowledgeable *not* because they rely on a type of reason. Instead, perception provides reasons precisely *because* it provides knowledge. Here is how Littlejohn puts the idea (Littlejohn, 2017, p. 19; italics mine):

According to the reasons-first approach to epistemic status, reasons and the possession of them are prior to [positive epistemic] status. In point of fact, the opposite is true. When you know that something is true, it is true you have reasons in your possession, but *it is only once you know that you have these reasons*. There is nothing prior to knowing that puts these reasons in your possession.

As Littlejohn here suggests, possessing reasons cannot be logically prior to knowledge since having knowledge is logically prior to possessing reasons. Namely, for Littlejohn a reason is something that you know.⁴ In this way, the knowledge-first version of ED holds that perception provides reasons for belief precisely by directly providing knowledge. Timothy Williamson has argued for a similar idea by

³For treatment of perceptual reasons, see Comesaña and McGrath 2016, Echeverri 2013, Schnee 2016 and Turri 2010.

⁴Here Littlejohn adopts Williamson’s famous formula “ $E = K$ ”, that is, the view that a subject’s evidence set consists of things the subject knows. Of course, this is consistent with the idea that perception provides reasons for perceptual judgments (for example, knowledge that “this cup seems red” or something along those lines (Brueckner 2005, 2008)). However, ED rejects attempts to retreat into such knowledge of “appearances”.

arguing that perceptual knowledge is not a matter of a belief formed on prior justification but rather provides a type of justification that *consists* in a bit of perceptual knowledge. For Williamson, “[a perceptually derived bit of propositional knowledge] did not get into [a subject’s] total evidence *as a result* of his coming justifiably to believe it; both things happened simultaneously in his coming to know [the relevant proposition]” (Williamson, 2008, p. 282). For Williamson, “perceptual knowledge [is] coeval with its perceptual evidence.” (Ibid.)⁵ It is clear that this point implies ED. Perceptual experience provides knowledge, but hallucination clearly does not. Accordingly, ordinary cases of perception and hallucinations have distinct epistemic characters. There is no type of rational support, that is, basis of justification for perceptual belief shared in common by perceptions and hallucinations.

If the abovementioned fact provides a general sketch of knowledge-first ED, then there is still the question of how the particulars of a theory of perception should be filled in. How does a subject acquire perceptual knowledge? In Littlejohn’s view, the central notion is that of a primitive perceptual epistemic norm. Consider:

Knowledge Norm: Believe *p* only if you (thereby) know *p*.⁶

For Littlejohn, perceptual knowledge results from a subject following a norm like the above in suitable perceptual conditions. It is significant that for Littlejohn, following this norm is primitive, rather of the subject being responsive to grounds for following the norm one way or another.⁷ For example, for Littlejohn, perceptual knowledge involves nothing further than the subject believing there is a green cup before her in the visible presence of a green cup. Accordingly, a subject need not base her following of the Knowledge Norm on previously acquired grounds, but can do so primitively, and thereby directly acquire perceptual knowledge.

On the particulars of perception, Alan Millar provides a more fleshed-out account. For Millar, perceptual knowledge is a matter of deploying recognitional capacities, that is, capacities for producing suitable conceptual classifications in response to visual experience (Millar, 2010, 2011).⁸ When deployed in ordinary conditions, such capacities produce knowledge. In keeping with the knowledge-first program, perceptual knowledge for Millar is not a matter of responsiveness to independently specifiable grounds. Instead, such knowledge provides the ground-level reasons that can guide the subject in more sophisticated activity.⁹ The reason is that for Millar, perception provides subjects with an opportunity for “[knowing] that *p* in virtue of seeing that *p*” (Millar, 2011, p. 337).¹⁰ All the

⁵Compare Millar 2010, p. 139: “instead of explaining the knowledge as, so to speak, built up from justified belief, we treat the knowledge as what enables one to be justified in believing.”

⁶This follows Millar 2011’s version of the knowledge-norm. From Littlejohn (2018), it is not entirely clear how Littlejohn prefers to render the knowledge-norm, but Christopher Kelp (2016) provides the following reductive rendering of Littlejohn’s view: “One justifiably believes *p* if and only if one knows.”

⁷After all, consider that the reasons-first approach accepts the Knowledge Norm. The difference is that according to the reasons-first approach, this involves responding to perceptual reasons.

⁸For a different view that crucially involves perceptual recognitional capacities, see Schellenberg (2011). However, for Schellenberg, the deployment of such capacities supports a representational theory of perception. By Millar’s lights, perceptual representation is part of characterizing the type of per

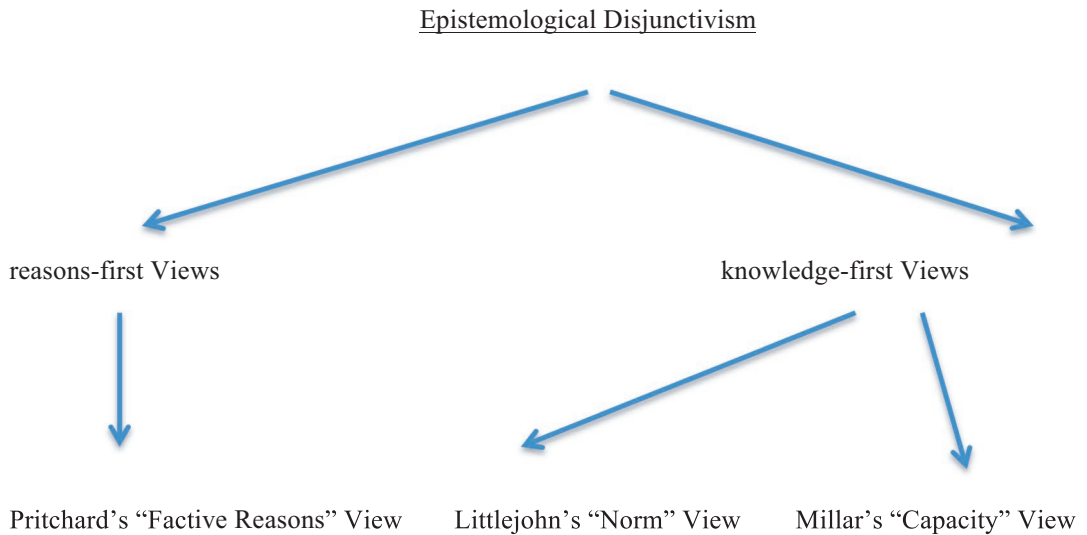
⁹It can seem to fit this account that perceptual knowledge is non-inferential (McGinn 2012). In Littlejohn’s rendering, the non-inferential character of perceptual knowledge is just a matter of its non-conformation to the “reasons-first” approach. As I will argue below, however, I think there is no inconsistency

¹⁰I have italicized ‘*p*’ throughout citations.

same, for Millar “seeing that p just is a mode of knowing that p .” Clearly an account of this shape cannot reduce epistemic standing to anything that falls short of knowledge, for example, justification since it explains knowledge in terms of knowledge. But for Millar this is the point since along Littlejohn’s lines, he agrees that we must “reject [...] the mainstream assumption that knowledge that p is always posterior in the order of understanding to justified belief that p ” (Ibid.).¹¹ The explanation of knowledge does not derive from an epistemic standing that can be independently specified. As Millar states the position (Millar, 2011, p. 336):

It falls out of this account that seeing that a is G entails knowing that a is G , but the explanatory work is effected by the invocation of recognitional abilities [as opposed to perceptual reasons/evidence/grounds].¹²

In summary, following Littlejohn’s broad distinction between reasons-first and knowledge-first views, and in turn distinguishing between Littlejohn’s and Millar’s versions of the latter, we can formulate the following taxonomy of versions of ED:



3 | THE ARGUMENT AGAINST THE REASONS-FIRST VIEW

Given the above discussion, we face a question: supposing we are sympathetic to ED, should we prefer the reasons-first or the knowledge-first version? In this respect, Littlejohn and Millar share a similar argument against the reasons-first view: I will here first sketch the common tenor and

¹¹Christopher Kelp characterizes this sort of position, on which justification requires knowledge, a “strong” version of knowledge-first epistemology (Kelp 2016, p. 81).

¹²This is close to the way Millar states his view at 2010, p. 134. Kelp (2016) provides what seems like a weaker characterization of Millar’s program, on which there is a significant place for reasons and justification. On Kelp’s rendering, Millar holds “a broadly accessible account of justification according to which justification requires possession of reasons that one must be in a position” (Kelp 2016, p. 3).

then explain how the shared argument finds particular application in Littlejohn's and Millar's individual theories.

The essence of the objection is that a reasons-first approach engenders a regress because it assumes what it is supposed to explain: perceptual knowledge. For both Littlejohn and Millar, this regress follows from requirements on what a perceptual reason is supposed to be. In this sense, Littlejohn's discussion is especially clear on the supposed requirements. In two different passages, Littlejohn starts from a general view of what reasons are supposed to be, before moving to derive more specific requirements. In the first passage, Littlejohn looks to a gloss from McDowell, 1978 (Littlejohn, 2017, p. 3; italics mine):

Your reasons for V-ing are, as [McDowell] puts it, *the light in which you took there to be something good, favorable, appropriate, or sensible* about V-ing.¹³

In a second passage, that can be presumed to articulate this same general idea of a reason as making an act seem "good, favorable, appropriate or sensible," Littlejohn speaks of reasons as providing a "path" (Littlejohn, 2018, p. 16; italics mine):

Whenever it would be appropriate for you to add a belief to your current belief set, this is *because there is a path from your current belief set to your expanded set that is provided by your grounds*. The path is available to anyone with your total grounds. For each justified belief you add, there would have been such a path to you that you followed.¹⁴

I take it that both of these passages intended to say something very general about reasons: they are items that one can appreciate as bearing a positive normative relation to an act (of belief-formation), such that one can so-to-say follow the "path" from one's reasons to the act or see the sensibility of one's act in the "light" of the reason. Accordingly, consider.

Reasons: Perceptual reasons must be items that allow an act (perceptual judgment in this case) to seem *good, favorable, appropriate, or sensible* (or, equivalently, items from which the subject can follow the normative "path" to the relevant act).

The objection to the reasons-first view consists in a particular conception of what is required of items for them to perform the general role specified by Reasons. Though in distinct ways, Millar and Littlejohn, in essence, agree on two requirements. (i) First, a subject's grounds or evidence-set consists only in what the subject believes in. This requirement "has to do with the kind of relation we have to bear to a reason for it to be the reason in light of which we believe, feel, or do something" (Littlejohn, 2018, p. 8). For example, suppose I *do not* believe my mother is ill. Then, her being ill cannot be a reason for me to rush home. (ii) The second requirement is specific to disjunctivism: grounds must *entail* the truth of the proposition known. If combined with (i), these requirements imply a particular conception of perceptual reasons. Only

¹³I take this to be sufficiently ecumenical to also fit Millar's treatment.

¹⁴I have copied Littlejohn's formulation verbatim, with the exception of substituting "grounds" for Littlejohn's use of "evidence". The reason is that the use of "evidence" will later become controversial.

propositions can be believed, and only true propositions can entail the truth of other propositions.^{15, 16} Therefore, the subject's grounds must contain relevant *facts*.¹⁷ Accordingly consider.

Specification: Only *believed facts* can provide the reasons required for ED.¹⁸

In turn, for both Littlejohn and Millar, this Specification engenders a regress. For Littlejohn, an appeal to perceptual reasons was supposed to explain and ground the subject's knowledgeable perceptual beliefs. But now, it seems like the subject already needs to have truthful perceptual beliefs in order to explain her possession of the relevant reasons. It seems these perceptual beliefs require further reasons, which, in turn, require perceptual beliefs and so on. For Millar, the regress starts from the more particular disjunctivist idea that perceptual reasons are conclusive because they consist in seeing *that* a particular fact obtains. By a broad consensus, seeing *that p* obtains is just a form of knowing that *p* obtains, that is, it involves believing that *p*.¹⁹ Accordingly, the subject requires reasons for believing that *p*, which in turn require seeing that *p* and so on.²⁰ For both Littlejohn and Millar, the gist of the argument is if ED is developed in terms of conclusive reasons for perceptual belief, the position collapses into explanatory emptiness since such perceptual reasons cannot precede perceptual knowledge.

How should we evaluate the potency of the "regress" argument against reasons-first ED? In what follows, I will argue for two claims. First, there is an alternative conception of perceptual reasons to be found in *experience*. Experience, so I will argue, meets Reasons, while not meeting Specification. Therefore, the regress is avoided. Second, more importantly, knowledge-first ED as proposed by Littlejohn and Millar fails to capture a critical feature of ED: the way the position combines perceptual knowledge with a form of *internalism*. I will discuss these two claims

¹⁵This commitment is explicit in Williamson, who holds that one's evidence contains only true propositions. But I argue here that "evidence" is the wrong way to think of epistemic grounds for the Strong Internalist, and accordingly much of the debate surrounding Williamson's stance on the nature of evidence is mooted as far as the present article is concerned.

¹⁶For Littlejohn's treatment of linguistic behavior in these cases, see Littlejohn (2012), pp. 102–105. Not coincidentally, these are all examples of inferential knowledge. Littlejohn notes that perceptual knowledge is not like this but is wrong to conclude that, therefore, reasons play no role in the perceptual case.

¹⁷This is Littlejohn's only consideration in favor of thinking of reasons as true propositions (Littlejohn 2012). I will not go further into this debate presently.

¹⁸While strictly not following directly from (i) and (ii), Littlejohn and Millar clearly both hold that reasons must be *known*, rather than being merely true beliefs. This will not make a difference for this article. Note that Specification is *not* equivalent to the controversial requirement that reasons be conceptual representations. This may follow from one's view of facts, but the argument does not turn on this point.

¹⁹For this point, see also Dretske (1969), French (2012), and Ranalli (2014).

²⁰Millar offers some further considerations against a "reason-first" approach (Millar (2010), pp. 121–122). One such consideration focuses on the phenomenology of perceptual judgment, which supposedly does not include one's grounding judgments in visual appearances (for example, I do not typically take myself to have a grasp on such appearances prior to my judgment). A second consideration concerns discursivity: subjects are frequently incapable of articulating the grounds for their perceptual judgments (e.g., paradigmatically in the case of the chicken-sexers, who are capable of identifying the sex of chicks without being aware of their grounds for doing so). Neither of these considerations is conclusive. Pointing to perceptual grounds need not take especially articulate form: "I saw it", for example, is commonplace. Consider as well that chicken-sexers are remarkable precisely for being *anomalous* in not feeling themselves in possession of grounds for their reliable perceptual judgments.

inversely: first, the way ED is motivated and second, the way a view of experience sustains this motivation without falling into a problematic regress.

4 | DISJUNCTIVISM: THE “HOLY GRAIL” OF EPISTEMOLOGY

To understand the motivations of ED, it is helpful to briefly look at a less-discussed aspect of the standard exposition of ED—that of Duncan Pritchard (2012, 2015). Pritchard famously describes ED as the “holy grail” of perceptual epistemology, on account of the way ED wedges together two features long thought incompatible: (a) a *guarantee* that ordinary judgments made in ordinary perceptual conditions constitute perceptual knowledge; and (b) an internalism that guarantees the subject *awareness* of occupying such favorable epistemic conditions. In Pritchard’s exposition, these two conditions are met since perceptual experience makes an epistemic contribution that (1) guarantees the truth of propositions that can be believed on its basis; and (2) is “reflectively accessible,” such that the subject is in some suitable sense aware of the truth of (1). Much attention has been given to (1) since it flouts a broad consensus that the epistemic contribution of experience is defeasible. However, (2) is equally critical to the ambitions and appeal of disjunctivism.²¹ This has to do with (a certain type of) skepticism (see critically, Pritchard 2008). For Pritchard, it is the fact that the subject can *know* that she is enjoying a perceptual opportunity for knowledge that promises to relegate a powerful variant of skepticism to epistemic irrelevance. On this analysis, the core skeptical assumption is that the possibility of hallucination and illusion rules out the possibility of a type of *self-knowledge*: namely, that of enjoying a certain opportunity for perceptual knowledge. Denying this assumption is what, in Pritchard’s exposition, distinguishes ED as epistemology’s “holy grail.”²²

How does emphasizing (2) relate to knowledge-first ED, as discussed above? The issue lies in the conception of the *rationality* displayed by the judging subject that is central to Pritchard’s exposition of ED. It is in enjoying the distinctive epistemic status afforded by perception that the subject is self-aware of having an opportunity for knowledge. In other words, since perception affords the subject with grounds that guarantee the truth of her perceptual judgment, the subject is self-aware of enjoying a position that is inconsistent with the critical skeptical assumption. Recall,

Reasons: Perceptual reasons must be items that allow an act (perceptual judgment, in this case) to seem *good, favorable, appropriate, or sensible* (or, equivalently, items from which the subject can follow the normative “path” to the relevant act).

Stated this generally, Reasons is a gloss on rational behavior (doxastic, in this case): behavior that, by the lights of the subject, is “good, favorable, appropriate, or sensible.” On Pritchard’s exposition of ED, part of the achievement of the view (if, of course, it can be maintained) is that perceptual experience puts the subject in a very distinct rational position: a position allowing her to judge in light of *what is manifestly so*. The judging subject displays the type of rationality of judging in

²¹For an account of how to understand (2) see [removed for review].

²²Contrast Jim Pryor’s much-discussed dogmatism (2000, 2005), which is characterized by its acceptance of this assumption, which it takes as compatible with perceptual knowledge.

accordance with what perception reveals. In other words, I take it that Reasons can simply not be jettisoned from a version of ED without compromising an essential part of its promise.²³

The point can be illustrated in terms of Ernest Sosa's distinction between "merely functional beliefs" and "judgmental beliefs" (Sosa, 2015; for discussion in light of ED, see Shaw, Forthcoming). As Kegan Shaw captures the distinction, "judgmental beliefs," but not "merely functional beliefs," are distinctly rational in that "it is part of what judgmental beliefs *are* that they depend upon evidence or epistemic reasons for thinking a proposition to be true" (Shaw, Forthcoming, p. 10; italics original). As Shaw notes, part of the ambition of ED lies in the way it conceives of perceptual judgments as "judgmental beliefs," rather than merely functional ones. A perceiving subject passing judgment displays precisely the type of rationality that consists in self-consciously letting her beliefs be guided by what is perceptually manifest to her.

This point is clearly not part of Littlejohn's knowledge-first ED and plausibly not part of Millar's view either. As to the former, Littlejohn explicitly vouches his view in a discussion of acts undertaken allegedly for "no reason at all," such as doodling during a talk (the example Littlejohn himself gives).²⁴ Though doubtlessly different in important ways, this example provides Littlejohn's model of a groundless act to which he assimilates the acquisition of perceptual knowledge. To illustrate, recall.

Knowledge Norm: Believe *p* only if you thereby know *p*.

Given Littlejohn's gloss on acts performed without support of reasons, it is clear that Littlejohn does not conceive of this norm as a rule for a subject to self-consciously believe, where she would have to consider reasons for believing *p* (namely, by considering whether she is in position to know *p*). That is, we should *not* understand Littlejohn to propose.

Knowledge Norm*: believe, or judge that *p* only for reasons that put you in a position to (thereby) know that *p*.²⁵

Compare two other formulations from Littlejohn and one by Jonathan Sutton (2007), who similarly develops a knowledge-first program: "You cannot justifiably believe *p* unless *p* is true" (Littlejohn, 2012, p. 122); "You ought not believe *p* unless you know *p*" (Littlejohn, 2012, p. 233);

²³Compare Sebastian Rödl's gloss on the justification of a judgment (Rödl 2018, p. 20; italics mine):

The possibility of justification depends on our *comprehension of a general source of judgment*: in judging, I understand my judgment to spring from a power [which is] the power of knowledge

Rödl here explicates one way of being rational in judgment. Being rational in this way consists *comprehending* your judgment as flowing from a capacity to *know* things in a certain way (for example, perceptually). This capacity to know is the "light in which" (or part of it) the subject makes her judgment. On Pritchard's version of ED, perception is such a "source of judgment".

²⁴While not relevant here, I doubt acts for which one can answer a question 'why?' are truly undertaken for no reason: "just for fun" or "oh nothing in particular" seem to articulate rational awareness, insofar as even the latter is susceptible for example to countervailing reasons ("I may doodle freely, as long as there is no need to pay special attention", e.g.).

²⁵Note that the norm cannot state judge that *p* if you know that *p*. To know that *p* one must have judged that *p*, leaving this norm not one a subject can follow.

“My view is that a subject’s belief that p is justified if and only if he knows that p : justification is knowledge” (Sutton, 2007, p. 7).²⁶ For all these formulations, the norm is *not* for the subject to act for reasons sufficient for knowledge; the subject enjoys justification if she follows a *primitive* norm of believing knowledgeably.

A similar point applies to Millar’s view. For Millar, recall, “seeing that a is G entails knowing that a is G , but the explanatory work is effected by the invocation of recognitional abilities” (Millar, 2011, p. 336). Concerning this view, we can ask in what consists the explanatory work done by Millar’s recognitional capacities? That is, in what way does the exercise of a subject’s recognitional capacities explain her acquisition of perceptual knowledge? Again, the answer is not because the subject *grounds* her judgment in her possession of the relevant recognitional capacities (i.e., by understanding her judgment *as* an exercise of capacities that she is self-aware of possessing). For example, knowing that it is a cardinal up there in the tree is not a matter of being aware of one’s capacities to recognize cardinals from how they look and being aware that this bird has the right look; instead, one *primitively* recognizes the cardinal. Consequently, the same point applies as did to Littlejohn’s view: part of the unique appeal of ED is supposed to lie in the subject’s *awareness* of occupying a position that is consistent with the truth of skepticism. Neither Littlejohn nor Millar captures this aspect of ED in the way achieved in Pritchard’s version.

5 | “EPISTEMIC CONTACT”: A PATH THROUGH EXPERIENCE

We seem to face a dilemma: (i) allegedly, basing perceptual beliefs on reasons engenders a problematic regress; and (ii) it is a critical part of ED to ground perceptual beliefs on reasons, in the general sense in which the “light in which” the subject judges includes the knowledgeable character of her judgment. But (i) is false. In this section, I will argue that the core mistake in the regress arguments of Littlejohn and Millar is an overly restrictive conception of perceptual reasons. Specifically, I will argue *experience* can contribute reasons, in a way that does not produce the problematic regress sketched by Littlejohn and Millar.

Consider.

Evidentialism: perceptual reasons are pieces of *evidence*; any perceptual reason for believing p is part of one’s *evidence set* for p .²⁷

Evidentialism expresses a common conception of rational support, and in characterizing the reasons-first version of ED, Littlejohn explicitly speaks of the idea as perception providing *evidence* for belief. Characterizing perceptual reasons in evidential terms can seem an innocuous bit of epistemological terminology, but in Littlejohn’s and Millar’s arguments, it plays a critical role. A critical part of Littlejohn’s argument concerns “the kind of relation we have to bear to a reason for it to be the reason in light of which we believe, feel, or do something” (Littlejohn, 2018, p. 8). Specifically, for Littlejohn, this relation is belief. If perceptual reasons are bits of *evidence*, this seems plausible enough: some bits of evidence (the suspect’s lying in interrogation, e.g.) cannot

²⁶Compare further (Kelp 2016, p. 82): “One justifiably believes p if and only if one knows.”

²⁷This may seem a terminological issue. If we acknowledge that evidence can entail propositions, it can seem that an evidential characterization of grounds must be innocuous. My suggestion here is that this impression is mistaken.

be my reason for an act (my voting “guilty” in jury session) if I do not believe it. Likewise, if perceptual reasons are *conclusive* evidence for certain propositions, then the relevant evidence had better entail these propositions. Accordingly, given an evidential conception of grounds, Littlejohn’s conception of what perceptual reasons are falls naturally into place.

However, recently, philosophers of perception (Brewer, 2018; Cunningham, 2016, 2017), with whom I am here in sympathy, have developed a different, non-evidentialist conception of perceptual reasons. In perceptual experience, objects and properties in the environment are *presented* to the subject. On these views, presented items in experience can constitute *objectual* reasons: grounds that consist simply of the worldly objects and properties presented in experience.²⁸ Having as one’s reason for judgment objects and properties presented in experience guarantees the truth of suitably formed beliefs. For example, if I am presented with the cup before me as well as its greenness, then if I form a normal perceptual judgment that the cup is green, the way the cup and its greenness figured in my experience guarantee my judgment to be true.²⁹ We might describe this as experience, placing the subject in a type of epistemic *contact* with reality.

If experience can constitute a type of epistemic *contact* with reality, and perceptual reasons can be *objectual*, how does this reflect on the regress argument against reasons-first ED? Littlejohn is right that subjects need to stand in a suitable relation to their grounds. But this relation need not be one of belief in a proposition; being presented with objects in experience is *itself* the right relation to stand in. There are different ways to understand exactly how experience constitutes a “light in which” subjects make judgments. On my preferred view, it is *part* of a conscious experiential state that the subject enjoys self-awareness of having the experience.³⁰ In being aware of her perceptual experience, the subject is aware of being in epistemic contact with the objects of her knowledge. This allows her to judge on grounds she is aware of as knowledge-guaranteeing. If such a way of thinking of experience is tenable, reasons-first ED does not engender a problematic regress. The way the subject is self-aware of being presented with objects and properties does not involve her believing a further proposition, which require further grounds, producing the regress.³¹

Littlejohn himself briefly considers the idea of experience providing grounds for judgment, but doubts that “you could acquire *p* as evidence by means of an experience that was not accompanied by a further belief that *p* is true” (Littlejohn, 2018, pp. 8–9).³² Motivating this conclusion, Littlejohn writes “one of the main epistemically significant differences between belief and experience is that when you believe *p*, you are committed to the truth of *p* in such a way that you would be mistaken if *p* were false. The same does not hold for experience” (Ibid.). But this argument fails to make contact with the account of experience sketched above. Specifically, there are two points to make. First, Littlejohn simply assumes that the relevant epistemic model is that *p* must enter a subject’s evidence set (and that accordingly the subject must bear a belief-like commitment to *p* being true). But, the experiential model is intended precisely as an *alternative*

²⁸For Brewer, it’s important that these are just objects, not properties. This is not part of the present view.

²⁹The existence of relevant objects and properties ensures the truth of the relevant judgments. Of course, this point is not part of some inferential bit of reasoning through which the subject arrives at these judgments.

³⁰This is distinct from ordinary relational views of experience, which typically do not include a role for self-consciousness. See my [Redacted for review]

³¹Of course, it is a fact that the subject enjoys an experience. But the epistemic work is done by the idea of standing in epistemic contact, not by the subject’s belief in a true proposition.

³²Where the latter, of course, would restart the problematic regress.

to this idea. In judging that the cup is green, I do not do so because on account of my experience; I am already committed to “the cup is green” as part of my evidence. Experiential contact with the cup and its greenness does not require belief-like commitment.³³ Second, even as he develops a form of ED, Littlejohn seems tentative about the epistemic power of experience. While it is true that experience does not involve a belief-like commitment to p , there is something curious about Littlejohn's denial of the claim that experience “[commits you] to the truth of p in such a way that you would be mistaken if p were false.” For the disjunctivist, your experience *guarantees* the truth of p , thereby ruling out the falsity of p . The idea that, for all the epistemic power of your experience, p might, nevertheless, be false is precisely the type of claim the disjunctivist denies.

The same model also allows the proponent of “reasons first” ED to escape Alan Millar's version of the regress argument. Moreover, the experience-based view of perceptual reasons in fact provides a natural gloss on Millar's perceptual epistemology based on recognition capacities. For Millar, the reasons-first approach must claim that perceptual reasons take the form of *seeing that p* obtains since this entails p , but “seeing that” entails knowledge or belief, and so the regress ensues.³⁴ However, the experiential conception of perceptual reasons obviates the need for this type of entailment: presented objects in experience are sufficient to ensure the subject an opportunity for knowledge. How does this fit Millar's view that perceptual knowledge results from the exercise of recognitional capacities? There is a natural story to tell. In being experientially confronted with items in her environment, the subject is *self-aware* of her ability to directly recognize items in response to what they look like (“that bird is a finch!”). This does not mean the subject makes judgments without perceptual reasons: she can articulate her reason along the following lines “I'm seeing it” or “finches look like that.”

A final point worth making is that the experiential conception of perceptual reasons fits well with the general epistemological framework offered by ED. According to ED, perception guarantees knowledge. This, of course, distinguishes ordinary perceptual judgments from other judgments: our normal, non-perceptual judgments are clearly not guaranteed to be true. On the experiential model sketched above, this is explained naturally: it is because perceptual judgments are grounded not in evidence but rather in a distinct way only available when the subject is experientially confronted with the items in her environment. That is, rather than positing a remarkably strong type of evidence, the heart of ED is precisely that it suggests that perceptual judgments are not based on evidence at all, but grounded in a type of direct epistemic contact.

6 | OBJECTIONS

I have sketched an account with the following features. A rational human subject (in virtue of this rationality) enjoys perceptual experience *self-consciously*. This provides a “light in which” the subject forms her perceptual judgments, which fits McDowell's above-cited characterization of reasons, but which is not “evidence” for belief, and which does not fall prey to the type of regress arguments that motivate Littlejohn and Millar. A view like this will raise various questions, which I will address here.

First, it is good to say more about the notion of self-consciousness invoked. Specifically, two questions suggest themselves. First, are we simply supposed to posit this self-consciousness as an

³³I take it that Littlejohn is correct that experience does not judge, that is, that in an experience, a subject does not undertake a commitment to a proposition (Travis 2013; Gupta 2013).

³⁴For discussion of this point in Pritchard's version of ED, and an object-centered alternative, see French 2012, 2014.

unexplained feature of a sensory awareness; that is, an ad hoc solution to the problems of perception, a *deus ex machina* to rescue a version of ED? This may seem bigger a pill to swallow if the form of self-awareness is supposed to inhere in a rudimentary, primitive type of sensory consciousness. Second, if much of the argument is supposed to turn on the relevant type of self-awareness, what prevents a view along the lines proposed by Millar and Littlejohn from simply co-opting whatever explanatory benefits are supposed to be attached to this idea?³⁵

The key to answering these questions is that the relevant self-awareness is (by broad consensus) a distinctly rational phenomenon. It is common to observe that a particular type of self-awareness characterizes a mature human mind; specifically, a type of self-awareness that is particularly “direct” or “internal” to the state of which it constitutes self-awareness. This is sometimes described as the “lucidity” of conscious states. Simply *having* the conscious state appears sufficient to be *self-conscious* of having the state.³⁶

On the present view, the human mind possesses this self-awareness in virtue of its intellectual character.³⁷ The type of self-awareness is paradigmatically expressed by the mode of self-attribution involved in “I think”. This bears on both questions raised above.

First, it would, indeed, be ad hoc to enrich sensation with self-awareness without further motivation. But this is not the present view. Even while acknowledging that this article is not the place for a full account, we should note that associating a distinct self-awareness with a rational mind is central to a vast philosophical tradition. This article fits that tradition.³⁸

This bears on the second point: what prevents a view along the lines proposed by Millar and Littlejohn from simply co-opting whatever explanatory benefits are supposed to be attached to this idea?³⁹ The answer lies in the aforementioned rational character of the relevant self-awareness. The core of the Millar/Littlejohn view is that perceptual knowledge is not a distinctly rational

³⁵Insofar as considered desirable, of course. I thank an anonymous reviewer at *Analytic Philosophy* for pressing for explanation of this point.

³⁶Keith Lehrer puts this idea in the following terms (2006, pp. 410–11): The knowledge of the [experiential] conscious state is somehow intrinsic to it. [...] Representation of the conscious state is somehow contained in the conscious state itself, yielding immediate knowledge of the state.” The same phenomenon has been described in terms of the “luminous” nature of certain mental states (Williamson 2000, Chapter 4), their “self-intimating” nature (Armstrong 1968), and their “transparency” (Boyle 2011). Lehrer’s description includes a “self-representational” element in his characterization of this sort of self-knowledge, which is not a commitment of the present view.

³⁷Whether this is true in other views is a matter of interpretation. Higher-order representational views explain self-awareness in terms of meta-representations, while self-representational views include a self-referential element in the content of the state. Both of these options would seem to require sophisticated representational resources associated only with rational creatures, but this lies beyond the reach of this article.

³⁸Here, it is helpful to note briefly the relation of the present view to Sellarsian worries concerning perceptual justification (often discussed under the heading of the “Myth of the Given”, cf. Sellars 1956). Sellars worries about an especially primitive, “atomistic” empiricist conception of perceptual justification: one on which a simply sensory relation offers the bottom logical brick in the edifice of perceptual knowledge, with no presupposing reliance on more sophisticated “conceptual” capacities. However, the present view does *not* fit this target. Yes, perceptual relations play a foundational epistemic role. However, as a manifestation of the subject’s *self-consciousness*, this perceptual relation is far from a primitive, unsophisticated sensory phenomenon. Specifically, perceptual relations of this sort are taken to require the subject’s intellectual abilities and operate against the type of background on which Sellars insists. (For a point of contrast, see the account of “simple seeing” developed at Dretske 1969.)

³⁹Insofar as considered desirable, of course. I thank an anonymous reviewer at *Analytic Philosophy* for pressing for explanation of this point.

phenomenon in the following sense: perceptual beliefs are not *judgments* in being beliefs based on perceptually available grounds. However, the idea that perception involves self-consciousness *includes* the notion of such perceptual grounds. After all, it includes the idea that the subject is self-aware of enjoying a perceptual experience of a certain sort. She can accordingly ground her perceptual belief in this bit of experiential self-knowledge; she holds the belief in awareness of these grounds.⁴⁰ And, this connection between the notion of self-consciousness and possessing grounds is not accidental. It is precisely rationality of the sort involved in thinking things for reasons and forming judgments (and conducting inferences) that is associated—according to the present view—with self-consciousness. This, of course, does not establish that perception *is* self-conscious in this way, but it does address the suggestion that self-awareness could figure equally naturally in the views of perception developed by Millar and Littlejohn as in the present view.

A different worry concerns perceptual defeat. How can the account deal with cases in which perceptual grounds are defeated (call this “perceptual defeat”)? As a prefatory point, we should recognize that this question can come in two forms: (1) how does an account on which perceptual warrant is *conclusive* deal with perceptual defeat? and (2) how does the specific above account, locating perceptual grounds in experience, deal with perceptual defeat? This is important because (1) is a question about ED generally. Since I am not concerned here to defend disjunctivism, but to consider a debate within the family of views that endorse ED, I will not respond to here (1).⁴¹

To illustrate the response to (2), it is helpful to consider some variants on a familiar scenario of perceptual defeat. Suppose I look at a barn, under no suspicion that anything out of the ordinary is going on, while, in fact, I find myself in the barn façade land, and what I am looking at is a barn façade. In a second case, I am also naïve to the situation, also find myself in barn façade land, but I happen to be looking at one of the very rare actual barns around. In a third scenario, someone has falsely *told* me that I find myself in a barn façade land, but in fact nothing extraordinary is going on. Call these scenarios (i), (ii), and (iii).

In each of these scenarios, the core element in understanding how the present view would treat the case is that the perceptual relation *presupposes* that the subject is in a position to gain the relevant perceptual knowledge. It is helpful to keep this point in mind as structuring the following responses to the particular cases. This is how the view would respond:

- (i) The subject is under the impression that she can know that there is a barn in front of her, but in fact she cannot (because there is barn in front of her). Accordingly, the subject does not perceive that there is a barn in front of her.

Is this problematic? No, the subject of course sees the barn façade, the item itself, and perceives that it has a number of properties, etc; that it is a barn is just not part of these.

- (ii) The second case is more difficult: the item is, after all, a barn. However, substantially, treatment remains the same. The subject is unaware of it, but she is not in a position to know that there is a barn in front of her. Therefore, the subject does not perceive that there is a barn in front of her.

⁴⁰Of course, this does not mean that perceptual judgment is inferential; the present view merely affirms a type of internalism about perceptual justification.

⁴¹Elsewhere [redacted] I respond to this worry, and in particular how ED responds to the problem of hallucination.

Is this problematic? It may seem less straightforward since this *is* a barn, and nothing out of the ordinary is directly involved in the subject's sensory access to the barn. However, on reflection, there is no problematic bullet to be bitten. The point is merely that perceiving depends on the subject's exercise of perceptual capacities. And, in this environment, the subject cannot exercise her perceptual capacities vis-à-vis barns, on grounds that (in this scenario) barns cannot be recognized based on their visual appearance. Accordingly, the subject does not perceive that the structure is a barn. To be sure, the subject perceives the item that is a barn, light reflects off the structure, and so on. But the barn-hood of the barn is not visible.

I should note here that this point does *not* turn on the “perceive *that*” phrase. The subject also does not perceive the property in question, if this is stated in object-property rather than propositional terms.⁴² For example, the barn-ness in this case is not visible. That is, what the present view entails is that what is *visible* depends on what the subject can exercise her perceptual capacities on, that is, that which she can be self-conscious of being in a position to know.⁴³

(iii) In this case, the subject *does* have perceptual grounds self-consciously available; she is merely pragmatically incapable of exploiting these grounds on account of having been misinformed. That is, in fact, it *would* count as knowledge if she were to form the right perceptual judgment, and perhaps she can think herself out of the false testimony she has been given. This is not a case of perceptual defeat.

In summary, the crux of the present position on perceptual defeat is that an ordinary perception is not an uncomplicated achievement. It requires a state in which the subject is self-aware of being in a position to gain perceptual self-knowledge—in other words, a condition in which the subject can successfully exercise her perceptual capacities and her capacities to gain knowledge by seeing. Suitably integrated into the subject's rational mind, experiences understood this way provide the subject with indefeasible grounds for perceptual knowledge.

ORCID

David de Bruijn  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6565-0341>

REFERENCES

- Armstrong, D. M. (1968). *A materialist theory of mind*. Routledge.
- Boyle, M. (2011). Transparent self-knowledge. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 85(1), 223–241.
- Brewer, B. (2018). Objectual reasons. *Analytic Philosophy*, 59(1), 1–18.
- Bruce, A. (2005). Fallibilism, underdetermination, and skepticism. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 61(2), 384–391. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2005.tb00454.x>
- Bruce, A. (2008). E=K and perceptual knowledge. In D. Pritchard & P. Greenough (Eds.), *Williamson on knowledge* (pp. 5–11). Oxford University Press.

⁴²Some philosophers cast this as the relevant distinction, arguing that “seeing *that*” signals a cognitively demanding state that requires the exercise of conceptual capacities, while “seeing *x*” (where *x* is an object or property) is a primitive sensory phenomenon. That idea is not part of the present view.

⁴³Of course, this does not mean the subject always already has the conceptual resources to articulate what is available for her to know. But, it does mean that what is not knowable by perception is not perceptible.

- Comesaña, J., & McGrath, M. (2016). Perceptual reasons. *Philosophical Studies*, 173(4), 991–1006. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-015-0542-x>
- Cunningham, J. J. (2016). Reflective epistemological disjunctivism. *Episteme*, 13(1), 111–132. <https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2015.62>
- Cunningham, J. J. (2017). Are perceptual reasons the objects of perception? In J. Gersel, R. T. Jensen, M. S. Thanning, & S. Overgaard (Eds.), *In the light of experience—Essays on reason and perception* (pp. 256–280). Oxford University Press.
- Dretske, F. (1969). *Seeing and knowing*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Echeverri, S. (2013). Is perception a source of reasons? *Theoria*, 79(1), 22–56. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1755-2567.2012.01139.x>
- French, C. (2012). Does propositional seeing entail propositional knowledge? *Theoria*, 78(2), 115–127. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1755-2567.2012.01130.x>
- French, C. (2014). The formulation of epistemological disjunctivism. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 92(1), 86–104. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12105>
- Gupta, A. (2013). The relationship of experience of thought. *The Monist*, 96(2), 252–294.
- Kelp, C. (2016). Justified belief: Knowledge first-style. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 93(1), 79–100. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12272>
- Lehrer, K. (2006). Conscious, representation, and knowledge. In U. Kriegel & K. Williford (Eds.), *Self-representational approaches to consciousness* (pp. 409–419). MIT Press.
- Littlejohn, C. (2012). *Justification and the truth connection* (pp. 19–45). Cambridge University Press.
- Littlejohn, C. (2016). Pritchard's reasons. *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 41, 201–219. <https://doi.org/10.5840/jpr201672277>
- Littlejohn, C. (2017). How and why knowledge is first. In J. A. Carter, E. C. Gordon, & B. Jarvis (Eds.), *Knowledge first* (pp. 19–45). Oxford University Press.
- Littlejohn, C. (2018). Evidence and its limits. In C. McHugh, J. Way, & D. Whiting (Eds.), *Normativity: Epistemic and practical* (pp. 115–136). Oxford University Press.
- McDowell, J. (1978). Are moral requirements hypothetical imperatives? *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 52, 13–42. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aristoteliansupp/52.1.13>
- McDowell, J. (2018). Perception and empirical rationality. *Analytic Philosophy*, 59(1), 89–98.
- McGinn, M. (2012). Non-inferential knowledge. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 112, 1–28.
- Millar, A. (2008). Perceptual-recognitional abilities and perceptual knowledge. In F. MacPherson & A. Haddock (Eds.), *Disjunctivism: Perception, action, knowledge* (pp. 330–347). Oxford University Press.
- Millar, A. (2010). *The nature and value of knowledge: Three investigations*. Oxford University Press.
- Millar, A. (2011). How visual perception yields reason for belief. *Philosophical Issues*, 21, 332–351.
- Pritchard, D. (2008). McDowellian Neo-Mooreanism. In A. Haddock, & F. Macpherson (Eds.), *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge* (pp. 283–310). Oxford University Press.
- Pritchard, D. (2012). *Epistemological disjunctivism*. Oxford University Press.
- Pritchard, D. (2015). *Epistemic angst: Radical skepticism and the groundlessness of our believing*. Princeton University Press.
- Pryor, J. (2000). The skeptic and the dogmatist. *NOÛS*, 34(4), 517–549. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0029-4624.00277>
- Pryor, J. (2005). There is immediate justification. In M. Steup & E. Sosa (Eds.), *Contemporary debates in epistemology* (pp. 181–202). Blackwell.
- Ranalli, C. (2014). Luck, propositional perception, and the entailment thesis. *Synthese*, 191, 1223–1247. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-013-0323-z>
- Rödl, S. (2018). *Self-consciousness and objectivity: An introduction to absolute idealism*. Harvard University Press.
- Schellenberg, S. (2011). Perceptual content defended. *NOÛS*, 45(4), 714–750. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0068.2010.00791.x>
- Schnee, I. (2016). Basic factive perceptual reasons. *Philosophical Studies*, 173, 1103–1118. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-015-0532-z>
- Sellars, W. (1956). Empiricism and the philosophy of mind. In H. Feigl & M. Scriven (Eds.), *Minnesota studies in philosophy of science* (1st ed., Vol. 1, pp. 253–329). University of Minnesota Press. Reprinted in (1997). Harvard University Press.

- Shaw, K. (Forthcoming). Epistemological disjunctivism and the internalist challenge. *American philosophical quarterly*. PhilArchive copy v1. <https://philarchive.org/archive/SHAEDA-6v1>
- Sosa, E. (2015). *Judgment and agency*. Oxford University Press.
- Sutton, J. (2007). *Without justification*. The MIT Press.
- Travis, C. (2013). *Perception: Essays after Frege*. Oxford University Press.
- Turri, J. (2010). Does perceiving entail knowing? *Theoria*, 87, 197–206. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1755-2567.2010.01065.x>
- Williamson, T. (2000). *Knowledge and its limits*. Oxford University Press.
- Williamson, T. (2008). Replies to critics. In D. Pritchard & P. Greenough (Eds.), *Williamson on knowledge* (pp. 279–384). Oxford University Press.

How to cite this article: de Bruijn, D. (2021). Knowledge-first perceptual epistemology: A comment on Littlejohn and Millar. *Analytic Philosophy*, 00, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phib.12256>