One of the tasks of phenomenology is to identify the ways in which various types of intentional states and acts relate to and depend upon others. No type of act has a better claim to fundamentality than does perception. In this entry I will discuss some of the defining features of perception, and the various ways in which other kinds of intentional acts depend on or refer back to it. I will also defend Husserl’s views on the fundamentality of perception against the objection that his theory is a version of the “Myth of the Given” (Sellars 1997).

29.1. Perception and intentionality

The first and possibly the most obvious feature of perceptual experiences is that they are intentional; each perceptual experience is of something. One might think that perception is distinguished from all other intentional experiences by the nature of its objects. This, however, is not the case. While not all kinds of objects can be perceived, each type of thing that can be perceived can also be thought about emptily. This is true even if it turns out that perceptual experiences are of something like sense data; obviously sense data can be thought about, as the existence of an extensive literature on them shows.

What distinguishes perceptual experience is the distinctive manner in which its objects are given (Husserl 2001, 140). In Husserl’s account, perceptual experiences uniquely possess the conjunction of the following features. First, they are intuitive as opposed to signitive or empty. Second, they are positing or positional. Third, they are intentionally direct. And fourth, they are originary.

(a) Perception is intuitive

Perceptual experiences are intuitive experiences. Intuition is a mode of consciousness in which an object is present to consciousness. Perception itself serves as the paradigm of intuitive consciousness, and, as is often the case in phenomenology, we can grasp the nature of its intuitiveness best by contrasting it with other co-directed sorts of acts (see Levinas 1995, 65). If I think that my basketball is inflated while in my living room, I am conscious of my basketball. But I am not conscious of it the way I am if I see, feel, and dribble the ball. In the latter case, the basketball,
and the state of affairs of its being inflated, is *present* to me in a way in which it is not when I merely think about it.

Perception is not, however, the only type of intuitive act. There are also “intuitive expectations” (Husserl 2001, 111), “intuitive remembering”, and generally all forms of nonperceptual “presentifications” (Husserl 2001, 110). Image-consciousness, in which we see or otherwise intuit one object by means of an image of it, is also an intuitive act. A picture of my basketball presents me with the object in a way completely different from “empty” thinking. Phantasy or imagination is also often intuitive as well, though not necessarily so. I can imagine—in fact I just did imagine—perceiving my living room while emptily thinking that my basketball is inflated. In this case, the basketball is an object of phantasy, but is not intuited.

Because perception is essentially intuitive, it is a type of phenomenally conscious experience. No matter how intimate the causal or informational connection between some chunk of the world and one’s mind may be, if one is not consciously aware of that chunk of the world, one does not *intuit* it (Fasching 2012, 126–7). Nor, for that matter, could one be unconsciously or non-phenomenally *emptily* aware of something either. Emptiness is not merely the lack of intuitiveness, but is a positive phenomenological feature of experience in its own right. An act that is intuitively empty is also essentially conscious and equipped with a phenomenal character of its own. In emptily thinking of something, the object is, to use a phrase of Alva Noë’s, “manifestly absent.”4 The distinction between intuitive and empty acts can only be drawn in the sphere of consciousness.

(b) Perception is positing

When I come to perceive my basketball to be inflated, I take the basketball to exist, and the perceived state of affairs to obtain. The most basic or “primordial” positing character of perception is that of “straightforward, naive certainty,” but this mode is “variable” (Husserl 2001, 75). In perception I take things to be simply there, but there is always the possibility of an experience’s content being “overwhelmed by stronger counterforces” (Husserl 1997, 251). To give Husserl’s often-used example, if I first experience something as a human, and then discover that it is a mannequin, the original “human” perception is “suppressed and put out of commission” (Husserl 2001, 73). Note, though, that even a suppressed perception is a positing act, but one that has undergone a “modification in [its] mode of validity” (Husserl 2001, 75). It is overwhelmed because it conflicts with other, more secure experiences, but only a positing act can conflict with other positing acts. If the “mannequin” perception were in turn overwhelmed, the original “human” perception would be ready to reassert itself.

Perception is not the only positing sort of act, of course. Empty or signitive thinking can also be positing. Nor is perception the only intuitive experience that is positing. Memory, which can be but need not be intuitive, is also essentially positing. In it, the past is posited as having been. Other presentifications can be positing as well. If I presentify to myself the rain that I know but do not perceive to be falling outside, my act is positing. Image-consciousness can be either positing or non-positing.5 Seeing an image of a centaur is not positing, but seeing an image of Barack Obama is. Phantasy, by contrast, is non-positing. It is not just that phantasy acts fail to posit their objects in the mode of certainty. They do not actually posit them at all in any of the modes of positing, not even as being overwhelmed or as doubtful. What I present in phantasy, which is a sort of “neutralized” consciousness, is beyond “reason’s jurisdiction” (Husserl 2014, §110, 214), and also beyond the possibility of conflict with the sphere of genuinely positing acts. I am not rationally required to alter my phantasy of a centaur in light of what I presently believe or perceive about the actual world.
(c) Perception is intentionally direct

“[P]erception is characterized by the fact that in it, as we are wont to express the matter, the object ‘itself’ appears, and does not merely appear ‘in a likeness’” (Husserl 1970a, §14a, 712). When I perceive something, such as my basketball, I am directly aware of it. This is a contentious point in the history of philosophy. According to many familiar accounts of perception, things such as basketballs cannot be directly perceived. Typically in such accounts, only ideas or sense data or mental representations can be directly perceived, while such things as basketballs can only be perceived indirectly. This is not Husserl’s view. Not only does he think that such things as basketballs can be perceived directly but, more to the present point, he denies that perception can ever be indirect (see Husserl 2014, §43, 76–77).

This point is purely phenomenological—that is, one that can be established prior to determining the ontological status of what we do in fact perceive. There are few forms of indirect consciousness, but they have a distinctive phenomenological character that gives them away, not only in reflection but in the course of unreflective experience itself. Image-consciousness is by far the clearest case of indirect consciousness (Aldea 2013, 374). When I see Mt. Everest in an image, I see Mt. Everest in virtue of seeing an image that, in its own nature, differs radically from Mt. Everest. More generally, in image-consciousness, one indirectly sees or apprehends the depicted thing—the image-subject—while directly seeing another, the image-object (see Husserl 2005, §9, 21). The image-object, moreover, is “immediately felt to be an image” (Husserl 2005, §12, 28). To confuse it with the thing itself would not be image-consciousness but illusion.

When we are indirectly conscious of something via some representation, we must be aware of both the representation and, via it, what it represents. Moreover, we must take the representation to be a representation (Husserl 1970a, Appendix to §§11 and 20, 594). One is not indirectly aware of the age of a tree simply by seeing the rings in its trunk, for instance, nor is one indirectly aware of a tumor just because one sees a radiographic image of one. The reason is that if one cannot interpret those signs or images, one is not aware of what they indicate or depict at all. It is clear from this that perception is not a kind of image-consciousness. When I undergo the kind of experience we would naturally describe as “seeing a basketball,” there is no object distinct from the terminal object of my experience—the basketball, if our natural description is correct—such that I am directly perceptually aware of it, and feel or take it to be a representation, much less a likeness, of something else. But since the presence of such a thing, functioning in that way, is a necessary condition of image consciousness, my experience is not a form of image consciousness.

There are other forms of what might be called indirect consciousness, but they are even less plausible candidates for perception. I might, for instance, be aware of something by means of directly perceiving a sign that designates it, or a state of affairs that indicates it, or a fact from which I infer it. But none of those forms of consciousness can qualify as perception of the designated, indicated, or inferred object, since they do not require that the terminal intentional object be intuited at all—and typically only take place when and because it is not (see A.D. Smith 2002, 77). This point alone by no means establishes that what I see directly is a basketball, or that things like basketballs can even be seen directly. What it does establish is that if things like basketballs cannot be directly seen, they cannot be seen at all.

(d) Perception is originary

The single most important feature of perception is that it “affords [its objects] in an originary way” (Ideas §1, 9). That is, in perception the perceived object is present “in the flesh” (Husserl 2001, 132).
Perception is the act in which objects become manifest as opposed to merely meant or intended, “the act that places something before our eyes as the thing itself, the act that originally constitutess the object” (Husserl 1991, §17, 43). This feature of perception does not follow from the three aforementioned features. An act can be direct, positing, and intuitive without presenting something in the flesh. I might, for instance, intuitively remember how my basketball looked five minutes ago, or form a present mental image of it. Nevertheless, the originary character of perception seems to depend on the other three conditions holding. It would not, it seems, be originary were it not intuitive, positing, and direct.

29.2. The foundational roles of perception

The originary character of perception explains two fundamental roles it plays in the overall life of consciousness. First, perception is evidentially fundamental. Indeed, it is difficult to distinguish “Evidenz” from perception itself. Ordinarily, by “perception” we mean the originary experience of sense-perceptible individuals and their features, as well, perhaps, as “inner” perception of our own conscious experiences. But on an expanded conception of perception, upon whose legitimacy Husserl insists (Husserl 1970a, 785), perception encompasses a much broader swath of categories of objects, including states of affairs and ideal objects such as universals and “universal states of affairs” (Husserl 1970a, §45, 786). Perception, on this broad conception, is any sort of experience in which “something appears as ‘actual’, as ‘self-given’” (Husserl 1970a, 785). And that is just how Husserl frequently characterizes evidence. Evidence, he writes, is “the giving of something itself” (Husserl 1969, §59, 156), the “mode of consciousness … that offers its intentional objectivity in the mode belonging to the original ‘it itself’” (Husserl 1969, §63, 168). In its broadest sense, then, perception is a kind of evidence; or, to avoid confusing the evidence of which we are aware and our awareness of it, for something to be given perceptually is for it to be given evidentially or with evidence.6

Because perception is the type of state in which something is presented with evidence, it is capable of conferring epistemic justification on certain beliefs, namely those whose contents the experience’s own content “fulfills.” Husserl’s account of fulfillment is an account of how that occurs. In fulfillment, “the object is seen as being exactly the same as it is thought of” (Husserl 1970a, 696). For example, I might think that my basketball is orange on the basis of my perceptual experience of it. Here, the thought and the perception are two independent acts, each trained on the same state of affairs, which unite in a higher-order act. Dallas Willard’s characterization of fulfillment reveals its complexity; it is a “union of the conceptualizing act with the object, on the basis of a corresponding intuition of that object together with a recognition of the identity of the object of the concept and of the perception” (Willard 1995, 152). Acts of fulfillment are of immense evidential importance. It is through them that we graduate from perception to conceptually and propositionally formulated knowledge.

There is a strong case to be made that Husserl is a kind of (moderate) epistemic foundationalist.7 First, his “principle of all principles” appears to be a principle specifying how perception, or originary intuition, provides noninferential justification for beliefs. It reads, in part, that “whatever presents itself to us in ‘Intuition’ in an originary way … is to be taken simply as what it affords itself as” (Husserl 2014, §24, 43). He also appears to hold that all inferentially justified beliefs derive their justification, whether immediately or mediately, to such self-giving perceptual acts. “Every mediated justification leads back, as is well known, to an unmediated, i.e. immediate justification.”8 In the same chapter he writes that “only originary evidence is the ‘original’ source of legitimacy” (ibid., 282).

What makes Husserl’s foundationalism moderate is that not all intuition is an infallible source of evidence. Immanent perception, in which each part and property of an object is given intuitively,
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is an infallible guide to what exists. “Each immanent perception guarantees necessarily the existence of its object” (Husserl 2014, §46, 82). But not all perception is immanent. The most familiar kind, the perception of “external” spatio-temporal objects, is not only inadequate, but essentially so. “Inadequate modes of givenness belong essentially to the spatial structure of things; any other way of givenness is simply absurd” (Husserl 2001, 58). We cannot perceive all the parts and features of a thing, much less apprehend all of its countless “looks” or profiles, in any single experience. To each perceived worldly thing there are unperceived parts and sides, which are intended but not given by means of that experience’s horizons. As Husserl puts it, “every external perception harbors its inner and outer horizons, regardless the extent to which perception has the character of self-giving; this is to say, it is a consciousness that simultaneously points beyond its own content” (Husserl 2001, 108). The horizon of my experience of the basketball points towards other, unseen sides of it, providing me with a sense of how further experiences of it might unfold.

The inadequacy of perception is what makes the perception of external objects possible. If my perception of the basketball were adequate, I would take the seen side—or rather, the side exactly as it appears from here—as the thing (Husserl 2001, 41). But if I did that, I would not perceive a basketball, since I would then take any alteration in my experience to be a presentation of a different thing. Thanks to horizons, I do not do that. By rendering experiences inadequate to their objects, horizons allow experiences to encompass a much vaster range of objects than they otherwise would—a range of objects far more extensive than sense data or “ideas.” That Husserl saw this so clearly stands as one of his most important contributions to philosophy. The downside of inadequacy, however, is that the beliefs based on such experiences are fallible. I may discover, through further experience, that what I see is other than I perceived it as being, or that it does not exist at all; “every experience” of an “external” or “transcendent” thing “leaves open the possibility that the given does not exist” (Husserl 2014, §46, 83).

Perception is not only epistemically foundational. It is also, and more fundamentally, intentionally foundational. We can obviously carry out intentional acts without perceiving the objects of those acts; thinking, and especially scientific thinking, is carried out largely in “empty” acts, acts which are neither themselves intuitive nor fulfilled by acts which are. Nevertheless, such empty intentions do not have their intentionality primitively. All of the acts which Husserl classifies as “objectifying” are oriented towards objects, and owe whatever relation they have to those objects to the possibility of being synthesized with acts in which those same objects are presented originarily. Empty meanings or concepts derive their sense, and thereby their reference to or direction upon their objects, from their relation with those perceptual experiences that present those objects in an originary manner. “What things are—the only things that we make assertions about, the only things whose being or nonbeing, whose being in a certain way or being otherwise we dispute and can rationally decide—they are as things of experience” (Husserl 2014, §47, 85). Because perception presents us with objects themselves, and just the same objects that we think and theorize about, it is the final authority in determining just what our signitive or empty intentions refer to. Husserl goes so far as to say that

we would not be able to speak at all of empty presentations and to attribute to them the character of having a relation to an object if it did not belong essentially to each empty presentation … that it could enter into a synthesis with a corresponding intuition.

(Husserl 2001, 113)

This should not be taken to mean that we must actually carry out such a synthesis. Rather, we must have some understanding of what that would involve. We must grasp at least some por-
tion of the “fulfilling sense” of a concept in order to possess that concept fully and authentically, where the fulfilling sense of a concept is the totality of the contents of possible experiences which intuitively present what it represents.10 As Dallas Willard expresses Husserl’s position, “Whenever we think . . . a certain thing exists or is qualified in such-and-such a manner, we always have some idea of what it would be like to determine whether it really is as it is thought to be.” Without such an idea, he continues, “there is little point in insisting that our thought is of any definite thing at all, or that it is even a thought” (Willard 1984, 206).

Finally, perception is genetically primary to every other form of intuition, such as phantasy, memories and presentifications generally, and image consciousness. “Perception is the primordial mode of intuitiveness.”11 Memory, when intuitive, is experienced as a reproduction of a former perceptual experience; “a remembering in itself manifests itself as a presentification of a perception.”12 In image-consciousness, the image-subject—that is, what the image is taken to depict—is present to me in a way that partly resembles the way it would present itself in person, without actually being present in person or seeming to be present in person (see Husserl 2005, §12, 27). Phantasy, when intuitive, is a modification of actual positing perception into “as-if” or quasi-perception. “Phantasy consciousness,” Husserl writes, “is a modified consciousness”. In it, “One is conscious of what is phantasied ‘as if [it were] existing’.”13 It belongs to the essence and sense of these modes of consciousness that they are modifications of perception. Each is intuitive, but none is originary.

29.3. The Myth of the Given?

Husserl’s account of perception and its relation to other intentional states might appear to be a version of Wilfrid Sellars’s “Myth of the Given.” Sellars devotes the majority of his attention, of course, to empiricist versions of the myth, but he did intend his argument to bear upon “the entire framework of givenness” (Sellars 1997, 14). And indeed it does, if it works. The basic argument is a dilemma.14 Either perception has propositional/conceptual content or it does not. If it does not, then it cannot confer justification on any beliefs. And if it does, then it cannot be foundational.

The argument for the first horn is simple and strong. If perceptual states do not have conceptual or propositional content, then they cannot stand in logical or inferential relations with the contents of other kinds of mental states such as beliefs. But in order for the content of one state to justify the content of another, those contents must stand in logical or inferential relations to one another.15 A brute sensation, for instance, might cause us to have beliefs. But it is not made of the right stuff to justify any of them (Davidson 2001, 143). As McDowell puts it, the believer in the nonconceptual given must hold that justification terminates in “pointing to a bare presence” (McDowell 1994, 39). But what possible epistemic significance could such an act have?

One promising response to this argument is to equip perceptual states with conceptual content. If my perception has the content “the basketball is inflated,” then it can obviously stand in inferential relations with the contents of beliefs. Now, however, we face the second horn. According to the versions of the Myth that Sellars attacks, givenness “presupposes no learning, no forming of associations, no setting up of stimulus-response connections” (Sellars 1997, 20). But according to Sellars, in order to know something as simple as that a patch is green, one must not only have a whole battery of color concepts, but one must also know which conditions are favorable for determining whether something is indeed green (Sellars 1997, 43). But in order to know that, one must know quite a lot of other things. One must know, for starters, that there are different lighting conditions and that these affect the way an object’s color appears. Imagine, then, how much knowledge must be presupposed to know that something is an inflated basket-
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ball, that someone has carried out a speech act with a given content, or that a certain event is a wedding ceremony. If givenness presupposes no prior learning, no possession of concepts, and no other knowledge, then it appears that none of these can be examples of givenness.

How might a phenomenologist respond to this dilemma? One possible response is to claim that this does not affect Husserl’s conception of givenness since he was not in the business of appealing to it as a foundation for knowledge. Gail Soffer, despite her incisive and, to my mind, devastating criticisms of Sellars’s conception of intentionality as fundamentally linguistic and his neglect of the “experiential dimension” of subjectivity (Soffer 2003, 318), appears to make such a concession. As she puts it, Husserl appeals to the given for reasons different from the philosophers Sellars targets.

For Sellars, the point is to found empirical knowledge, to identify the noninferential bases for inferences. By contrast, for Husserl the category of the given serves to thematize the subjective elements of experience (the immanent) and to show how what is taken by us to be knowledge presupposes and emerges out of these subjective elements.

(Soffer 2003, 310)

Certainly part of the job of phenomenology is to show how all of the immanent elements in experience—including, crucially, the intuitively empty intentions that are so critical in all thinking—function in the production of ordinary and scientific knowledge. This is all part of a more general descriptive enterprise of identifying the immanent or subjective components in virtue of which any conceivable object could be meant, whether in knowledge or not.

Nevertheless, the category of the given in Husserl is a decidedly epistemic one, and one of its primary functions, for Husserl, is precisely to serve as a foundation of knowledge, whether that knowledge is empirical, a priori, or phenomenological. It is not phenomenology’s task to provide the givens for each area of scientific inquiry or ordinary life. Things are given to non-phenomenologists too, and they know lots of things thanks to that. Phenomenology’s task is to understand how the givenness of things, whether immanent or transcendent, confers epistemic justification on our judgments and beliefs, whether empirical or a priori (see Husserl 1970b, §55, 189). And, of course, phenomenology has its own proprietary field of givenness from which it legitimizes its own assertions. Knowledge, for Husserl, both in phenomenology and in general, must “leave the last word to the things themselves” (Husserl 1970a, 45), and they can only provide that “last word” when they are originally given.

Sellars’s dilemma, then, remains. It would seem that the first task in responding to it would be to determine whether perceptual experiences have conceptual content or not, and then try to respond to one of the horns of the dilemma. That first step is no easy task. It is far from clear whether Husserl himself endorsed conceptualism about perception at various positions of his career. The most sophisticated treatment of which I am aware is offered by Donn Welton, who argues that Husserl’s early understanding of “epistemic perception” (Welton 2000, 185) as the “interpretation” of intrinsically non-intentional sensations by meanings or concepts was gradually corrected and deepened by a genetic analysis of “originary perception” (ibid.). Originary perception, in turn, is explained in terms of the “interlocking associative, spatial, and temporal syntheses” presupposed by conceptual, epistemic perception (ibid., 183). But even if we get the right story about Husserl’s own thinking about perception—and I think Welton largely does—there remains the difficult task of determining the truth about perception itself. Naturally, Husserl can help us here, but the final word must, if possible, be left to perception itself.
Fortunately, we do not need to resolve that difficult issue to handle Sellars’s dilemma, since Husserl’s theory gives us the resources to answer both horns. And that is a good thing, since Husserl’s commitment to the justificatory power of perception very probably runs much deeper than his commitments to its precise composition and structure—as can be seen from the fact that it plays roughly the same evidential role throughout the changes and developments that Welton documents.

Beginning with the first horn, suppose, as I strongly believe, that perception does not have conceptual content. Does it follow that it cannot justify beliefs? I see no reason why it could not. The assumption that only states with propositional or conceptual content could justify beliefs is plausible provided we think that only states with such content could have conditions of satisfaction—that is, be correct or incorrect—or have facts or states of affairs as their intentional objects. But both claims are far from obvious. Consider the various physical, conventional representations at our disposal. Sentences can depict states of affairs and have conditions of satisfaction. But so can maps and pictures (Crane 2009, 458). Maps and pictures are not, however, types of sentences. In fact it’s not clear that they have propositional content at all. For example, every proposition has a negation. But maps and pictures do not have negations (Millikan 2004, 93). You can draw a picture that depicts something contrary to what another depicts, but you cannot draw the contradiction of another. Despite that, sentences and maps can be compatible or incompatible with one another. A map which depicts Texas as being smaller than Ohio conflicts with the sentence “Texas is bigger than Ohio.” It is not, for all that, a kind of sentence. If conventional representations can represent states of affairs despite not having propositional content, it seems eminently plausible that non-conventional bearers of intentionality can too.

Moreover, what makes mental states with propositional content capable of supporting or defeating one another is not specifically their content, that is, the way in which they represent their objects. What makes them relate to one another lies, rather, in the objects themselves. The object of a proposition is a full state of affairs; propositions don’t just represent things, but represent them as being some way or other. Propositions are consistent, or not, in virtue of representing states of affairs which are mutually compatible, or not. If there are other experiential contents that can also represent states of affairs, then they will also be compatible or incompatible with propositions thanks, again, to the nature of their objects. And if they can do that, then it is difficult to see why they could not stand in justificatory relations with propositionally contentful states. If a mental state M whose content is the proposition that the basketball is inflated can, under certain conditions, confer justification on a belief with the content that it will bounce if dribbled, then a mental state whose object is identical with M’s but whose content differs—a perceptual presentation of that state of affairs, for one—should also be able to perform that function.

I think a strong case can be made that perceptual experiences have nonconceptual contents which have full states of affairs as their objects. But we can settle for another, more modest claim here, and that is that whatever the nature of the content of perception turns out to be, it at least is sufficiently rich in its intentionality to have states of affairs among its objects. Perception is not confined to the traditional “givens” of empiricist epistemology. It takes in individuals that bear properties and stand in relations to other individuals and to those perceiving them. What I perceive now is a basketball on the floor. That is, I don’t perceive a patch of orange whose bearer is unspecified or unseen, nor do I perceive the basketball to be unrelated to the floor. I perceive a basketball as being orange, and as being on a floor.

The second horn of Sellars’s dilemma can also be answered. Suppose that perceptual experiences do have conceptual content. And let us also grant right away that there are many states of affairs that can only be meant, or even perceived, on condition that the subject has a consider-
able store of background knowledge and conceptual abilities (see Willard 2000, 42–43). Even the nonconceptualist about perception has to admit that concept possession, and the knowledge that such possession requires, is required for many acts of fulfillment. I cannot verify the proposition that the basketball is inflated without having the concepts “basketball” and “inflated.” If acts of fulfillment are cases of noninferential knowledge, as I think they are in Husserl’s view, we have to answer this horn of the dilemma no matter what our views on perception itself.

The first thing to point out is that the possession of concepts and prior knowledge helps rather than hinders our access to actuality. As Dallas Willard puts it,

> Since the concept is a property of the act, it does not intervene between the act and its object, and does not close the mind off from the very objects or world that it was supposed to make accessible. It does not encapsulate the mind or its contents, any more than the properties of other things or events encapsulate them.

(Willard 2002, 74)

Not only do concepts not prevent us from reaching the things themselves, they need not prevent us from having immediate and noninferential knowledge of them. There is no indication that Husserl regards them as doing so. His principle of all principles, after all, states that givenness is a sufficient condition for justification, and nowhere, to my knowledge, does he insist that one must lack certain concepts or bodies of knowledge in order to have something given to one. And what an odd proposal that would be. I think we would have difficulty finding anyone who seriously thinks that ignorance is a more favorable initial condition for having things given to one than knowledge, despite the fact that this might follow from the familiar view that our concepts and theories stand between us and the world. Husserl, I think, gets it right with the simple reminder: “givenness is givenness” (Husserl 1997, 300). That is, no matter what the conditions might be for something to be given to me, when it is given, it is given. I likely acquired the concept <basketball> only by having first acquired a vast amount of knowledge—knowledge not just of colors and shapes and various platitudes of folk physics, but knowledge of cultural practices, including the practice of playing the game of the same name. One could conceivably have acquired that concept in very different ways—through a divine gift, evolution, ideology, or appropriately installed neural implants. But no matter what the story behind my acquisition of the concept <basketball>, when a basketball is given, it really is given. A “genetic” account might be critical for a full account of how we came to possess the ability to direct our minds to basketballs, but nothing that such an account uncovers can undo the fact that what is now given is given. And if it is given, there is no need to consult other sources about its presented features and existence. We can consult it, the thing itself. The conditions in virtue of which something is given don’t compromise its givenness. They enable it.

William Alston has made a very similar point. My knowledge that the basketball is inflated might presuppose other knowledge in two ways. It might depend on other pieces of knowledge for its existence, or for its warrant or “epistemization.” Only the latter kind of dependence would undermine its noninferential status, however. “Immediate knowledge is knowledge in which the belief involved is not epistemized by a relation to other knowledge or epistemized belief of the same subject” (Alston 1989, 63). What the defender of Sellars’s second horn would have to establish is that my belief that the basketball is inflated—and all perceptual beliefs—are inferentially justified by other beliefs or pieces of knowledge, not just that they depend for their existence on other beliefs and knowledge. But that is exactly what, phenomenologically, does not seem to be the case. That is, while it seems clear that I could not have basketball-thoughts fulfilled on a perceptual basis without a rich stock of concepts and knowledge, and probably a
conventional language, this knowledge is what enables me to be in the right condition to have
basketballs given to me, not something that somehow undermines their givenness. For instance,
I do not use my knowledge of the English language as *premises* in my reasoning about everything
I think about, even though knowing English is, for me, a condition without which I would not
be able to reason. Or, to give Alston’s example, “If one tried to teach a child that $2 + 3 = 5$ while
keeping him ignorant of, for instance $1 + 1 = 2$’, he would fail miserably” (Alston 1989, 63).
Despite that, one can know noninferentially that $2 + 3 = 5$. Similarly, I do not use the knowledge
I possess in virtue of possessing concepts—including, critically, my knowledge of what sorts of
experiences fulfill them—as *premises* when I apply concepts to what is given. Rather, I use them
as tools to apprehend what is given. And doing that does not render perceptual beliefs inferential
or perception itself anything less than an originary manifestation of objectivity. As Evan Fales
puts it, “The application of a learned concept to an experience, so long as it does not involve any
present inference, can influence the character of that experience, without thereby in any way
destroying the givenness of what thereby appears” (Fales 1996, 123). Indeed. And not only can
it “influence the character” of such an experience without destroying the given, it might make
the experience of givenness possible in the first place.

Perhaps it would help to think of the acquisition of a conceptual scheme and a body of
knowledge in relation to the possibility of having things given as similar to practice in the acquisi-
tion of bodily and cognitive skills. A basketball does not just have intellectual significance for
those who know how to play. For those with skill, it is not just a middle-sized orange spherical
object customarily used in a certain sporting event. It also possesses what Merleau-Ponty calls a
“motor physiognomy,” thanks to which it has a “living signification” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 217)
that speaks to us not only as intellects but as embodied persons. Thanks to repeated interactions
with basketballs, skilled players know how much force to exert to dribble, catch, pass, or shoot
(see Dreyfus 2014a, 95). They can immediately and unreflectively handle it in ways in which a
complete novice could not. This rich background of know-how, founded on extensive practice,
does not make the expert’s actions or practical knowledge mediated, indirect, inadequate, or
inauthentic. Exactly the opposite is the case. The skilled player acquires the ability to perform
smoothly and immediately what a novice can only do clumsily, reflectively, and in a step-wise
fashion. And with that facility in action comes facility in perception. The basketball shows up
immediately for the skilled player as something to be handled in accordance with those skills.

The same goes for other, more intellectual forms of skill. Someone who has played thousands
of games of chess, and has thought deeply about the game, is capable of perceiving chess-related
states of affairs to which a novice is blind. As Hubert Dreyfus puts it, “a chess grandmaster, when
shown a position that could occur in an actual game, almost immediately experiences a compel-
lings sense of the current issue and spontaneously makes the appropriate move” (Dreyfus 2014b,
234). The reason is that the grandmaster *perceives* things that the rest of us do not, and perceives
them because of, rather than in spite of, her extensive body of knowledge (see Haugeland 1996,
274). No doubt the same is true of other experts. Expert doctors, physicists, and geologists
are simply capable of seeing and immediately verifying more than the rest of us, not, obvi-
ously, because they are infants with a pristine, concept-free apprehension of a world of pure
experience—a condition difficult to distinguish from blindness—but because they are knowl-
edgeable agents with a sophisticated battery of concepts and an imposing body of knowledge
and skill honed and perfected over time (Siegel 2012, 201). This is exactly how we can think of
the possession of concepts and knowledge in their relation to the givenness of things. We, but
not babies or bats, can *see* a $20 bill, a computer, or a wedding ceremony, and see them as what
each of them is. The background knowledge and conceptual skill that such seeing obviously
Perception requires does not compromise the immediacy of such experiences. Rather, it enables it. Just as practicing a skill makes one capable of automatic and seamless execution, so the possession of concepts and knowledge make one capable of immediate perception and fulfillment that might be otherwise impossible.

29.4. Conclusion

Perception is completely unlike any other type of intentional act, and virtually every other kind of act refers back to it in some manner. Every form of nonperceptual intuition is, and is experienced as, a modification of it. Nonintuitive acts refer back to perception insofar as they require it for their sense and, in the case of judgments, for their epistemic status. Husserl’s account of perception and its role in knowledge does not, moreover, fall to Sellars’s arguments against the Myth of the Given. Whether perception has conceptual content or not, Sellars’s dilemma can be avoided. And while it is clear that many perceptual acts and acts of fulfillment require that one possess concepts and prior knowledge, those possessions are ontological enabling conditions for various objects to be perceptually given, not evidential intermediaries that prevent things from being given.

Notes

1 See, for instance, Welton 2000, 176.
3 For an excellent discussion, see Romano 2015, Chapter 2.
4 See Noé 2008. He uses that phrase to describe the status of the image subject in image consciousness. But the phrase also applies nicely, though for different reasons, to the unseen parts and sides of a seen object, and, as here, to its being intended in its absence. Also see Pietersma 1973, 96, Willard 1984, 227 and Bernet 2003, 156.
5 Husserl 2005, 564; also see Kurg 2014, 35–36.
6 On the difference between Evidenz and evidence, Heffeman (1998, 7) writes: “there is a significant difference between the accepted Anglo-Saxon view that evidence is a body of data by means of which one sees that something is so-and-so or such-and-such and the prevailing Teutonic perspective that “Evidenz” is the actual activity itself of seeing and letting be seen that something is so-and-so or such-and-such.” I hope this distinction is preserved by treating perception, not as evidence, but as the consciousness of evidence.
7 See Erhard 2012, Wiltsche 2015, and Berghofer 2017 for defenses. Also see Hopp 2012.
8 Ideas §141, 280. This passage is helpfully discussed at some length in Berghofer 2017, §2.3, 14–15.
10 See Husserl 1970a, Investigation 1, §14; also see Husserl 1970a, 692.
11 Husserl 2001, 110; also see Husserl 1969, §86, 209.
12 Husserl 2001, 110; also see Husserl 1969, §59, 158.
13 Husserl 2005, 546; also see Brough 2005, LV).
14 See Bonjour (1978, 11) and Steup (2000, 90–91) for exceptionally clear presentations.
15 The clearest formulation of this familiar argument is due to Bill Brewer (2005, 218).
16 See Searle (1983, 41) for an argument that visual experiences have propositional content because they have conditions of satisfaction. See Noé (2004, 183) for an argument that perception has propositional content since it “presents the world as being this way or that,” which requires that “one must be able to appreciate how the experience presents things as being,” which in turn “is just to say that one must have concepts of the presented features and states of affairs.”
17 As I have argued elsewhere. See Hopp 2011, Chapter 2, section 2.
18 Husserl 1970a, 579. Also see Smith and McIntyre 1982, 6–9.
19 Epistemization is what accounts for the difference between true belief and knowledge. See Alston 1989, 58.
References


Heffernan, George. 1998. “Miscellaneous Lucubrations on Husserl’s Answer to the Question ‘was die Evidenz sei’: A Contribution to the Phenomenology of Evidence on the Occasion of the Publication of Husserliana Volume XXX.” Husserl Studies, 15: pp. 1–75.


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