Paradigmatic “ordinary objects” are objects that we can see with the unaided eye, for instance the tomatoes, pigs, and lemon-like bars of soap beloved by philosophers of perception. In the Lockean tradition of “indirect realism”, ordinary objects were conceived as speculative causes of perceptual experiences, which themselves involved direct awareness of ideas or sense data. Contemporary philosophy of perception almost invariably repudiates indirect realism, following the lead of, among others, Austin and Dretske. As Dretske puts it, “the tomato is the sensory core, the directly given” (1969: 75–6).

The tomato and its ilk are frequently taken to have further significance. On one view, the tomato is a constituent of the experience of it: Some of the objects of perception – the concrete individuals, their properties, the events these partake in – are constituents of the experience. (Martin 2004: 39)

Another view (which may be held together with the constituency thesis) is that the perceiving subject is acquainted with the tomato:

Perception consists most fundamentally in a relation of acquaintance directly with the constituents of the mind-independent world ... mind-independent material objects. (Brewer 2017: 216)

Compatibly with both the constituency and the acquaintance theses, the very possibility of thought about mind-independent reality may be placed on the tomato’s shoulders:

Attention to a tomato drops the tomato as an anchor of the objective world. (Hellie 2014: 250)

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1 In this essay, objects are particulars; accordingly, properties or universals are not objects.
Another indication of the importance of ordinary objects in the philosophy of perception is the amount of space devoted to the problem of hallucination. When one (visually) hallucinates a tomato, one seems to see a tomato but in fact sees nothing. In the Lockean tradition, hallucination is in a sense basic: to see a tomato is to have an experience that is of exactly the same kind as a tomato-hallucination, appropriately caused by the presence of a tomato. The contemporary approach is the reverse: seeing a tomato is the basic notion, and hallucination is conceived of as failed seeing. But exactly how to account for the seeming presence of a tomato when no tomato is present is taken to be an exceedingly difficult issue, with a number of incompatible proposed solutions. The tomato is not the problem; rather, the problem is the absence of one.

Ironically, as the philosophy of perception has come to clasp tomatoes and other ordinary objects to its bosom, metaphysics has come to view them with grave suspicion. Some prominent metaphysicians deny that there are any. Thus van Inwagen: “My position vis-à-vis tables and other inanimate objects is that there are none” (1990: 99). (Van Inwagen thinks that there are animate objects, but the tomato is not one of those.) Naturally, many prominent metaphysicians disagree, but the issue is often viewed as one that demands an initial position of neutrality, with opinion on either side being earned only by sophisticated argument. As Merricks puts it, the issue “must be decided on philosophical grounds” (2001: 9).

Why the initial neutrality, though? The metaphysicians of course acknowledge that the vulgar – or as we say these days, “folk” – speak of ordinary objects. But here they generally side with Hume against Berkeley, according the vulgar opinion little weight. The metaphysicians have a point: although the vulgar know a lot, the mere fact that they believe something is very weak evidence for it. “Common sense” or “intuitions” sometimes turn out to be nothing more than fashionable prejudices.

But there is more to appeal to than the vulgar. What about the deliverances of perception? For sympathizers with contemporary philosophy of perception, it is natural to take perceptual evidence to

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2 Mixed cases, where one both hallucinates and sees, will be ignored, as will perceptual modalities other than vision. These restrictions will not affect the argument.

3 Thus there are tomato plants, according to van Inwagen.
consist in facts about individual ordinary objects – that this (the tomato) is red and bulgy, for example. And if so, then perception is decidedly not neutral on the existence of ordinary objects.

Metaphysicians are prone to disagree. I seem to see a tomato. Is there a tomato that I see, or merely a plurality of simples (or atoms), “arranged tomatowise”? According to Merricks,

My visual evidence would be the same whether or not the atoms arranged [tomato]wise composed something. (2001: 9)

Thomasson concurs, writing that the competing ontologies of eliminativists, such as van Inwagen and Merricks, and realists, such as herself, are “empirically equivalent” (Thomasson 2015: 158). Similarly, another realist, Korman, in the course of discussing “debunking” arguments for eliminativism, writes that “the arguments are best understood as targeting only those who believe in ordinary objects for the usual reasons, namely, that it seems perceptually as if there are objects of the relevant kinds” (Korman 2014: 4).

The quotation from Korman suggests that he does not take perceptual evidence to consist of facts about the perceiver’s environment; rather, perceptual evidence (or the “usual reasons”) consists of facts about perceptual appearances, or seemings. And Merricks and Thomasson likely agree. For example, Merricks claims that in “a world like ours except that, while there are atoms arranged [tomato]wise in that world, there are no [tomatoes]”, things “would seem to us just like the actual world” (2001: 55). Unless Merricks is equating evidence with seemings, this remark is, in context, of little relevance.

In any case, the effectiveness of this maneuver is quite doubtful, because ordinary objects are hard to expunge from mere seemings. Perceptual experience, whether veridical or not, requires the existence of ordinary objects. The next two sections make that case, culminating in an argument for the existence of ordinary objects. The subsequent two sections object to a variety of ways of responding to the argument. The final section sums up.

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See also Merricks 2016. Merricks’s explanation of the crucial locution ‘arranged tomatowise’ (4) assumes (as he notes) that counterfactuals with impossible antecedents are not vacuously true, a controversial position (see n. 21). For the sake of the argument, ‘tomatowise’ and the like will be taken for granted here.
1 Scene and Object

This section argues for the two main premises in the argument for ordinary objects. Simply to avoid distracting qualifications, the informal exposition will take the vulgar point of view and assume the existence of ordinary objects.

1.1 The Successful Case

Consider an everyday example of successful – hence veridical – perceptual experience: you have keen vision and in excellent lighting conditions see a red tomato and a green lime on a white kitchen counter. You see these things as they are: the tomato looks red and is red, the lime looks dimpled and is dimpled, and so on. To repeat a question from P. F. Strawson, “How is it with you, visually, at the moment?” (Strawson 1979: 93). As Strawson says, a natural response is simply to specify what you see in more detail: “I see a red bulgy smooth tomato next to a green oval dimpled lime, against a white background.”

Of course this specification is drastically incomplete. Attributes like glossiness and shading have been left out, as well as the spatial relations between the items in the scene and between those items and your position. Even the attributes themselves cannot be captured by ordinary adjectives like ‘red’, since the color of the tomato will be variously saturated, bright, and of a more determinate hue.

Once these additional parameters are included, one might expect that this would render the verb ‘see’ redundant. Color is detectable only by vision, but that is just one example: glossiness, (visual) texture, shading, and illumination are also propriety visual attributes. Even Aristotelian “common sensibles” such as shape seem less common on closer examination: when one runs one’s fingers over a black triangle on an otherwise white sheet of paper, is one’s tactile experience of boundarylessness illusory? There is, after all, a triangular boundary that one can detect by sight. It is more attractive to say that the kinds of boundaries (and so shapes) detected by vision and tactile perception are different: visual boundaries concern how surfaces interact with light; tactile boundaries concern how they deform under pressure. Visual and

tactile shapes are of a common genus but are distinct species. This is supported by the physiological characteristics of our senses: the front ends of our visual and auditory systems, for example, are devoted to the recovery of different sorts of information about our environment.

Granted that ‘see’ is in principle dispensable, does a suitably detailed specification of the scene before your eyes provide a complete answer to Strawson’s question? Those who think that experience has “sensational properties” (Peacocke 1983), or believers in “mental paint” (Block 2003) will answer no. The issue is controversial, but there is at least a presumption in favor of the opposite answer. The point of perception is to inform the animal about its environment; information about sensational properties or mental paint is ecologically useless. When asked Strawson’s question, one would expect the environment to be the only place to look.

In any event, the argument of this essay would (probably) not be much affected even if sensational properties or mental paint were admitted, but the cost in additional complexity would be excessive. We will therefore leave sensational properties and mental paint on the shelf and work with a popular view we can call presentationalism, expressed in the following quotations:

To know what one’s experience is like is to know what properties, aspects or features are presented to one in having the experience. There seems to be no way to pick out the what it is like properties of the experiences without also picking out corresponding properties which objects may appear to have. (Martin 1998: 174)

The phenomenal character of your experience, as you look around the room, is constituted by the actual layout of the room itself: which particular objects are there, their intrinsic properties, such as color and shape, and how they are arranged in relation to one another and to you. (Campbell 2002: 116)\(^6\)

[T]here are no images (two dimensional arrays) in the phenomenology of vision: it is the relevant tract of the environment that is present to consciousness, not an image of it. (McDowell 1994: 342)\(^7\)

\(^6\) See also Campbell in Campbell and Cassam 2014: 18: “The qualitative character of perceptual experience has nothing particularly to do with perception or experience; it is simply the qualitative character of the world observed.”

\(^7\) The subsequent sentence implies that the quotation describes “what visual consciousness is like.”
Campbell’s ‘phenomenal character of your experience’ could be replaced with the non-technical ‘how things seem to you’, on a contextually natural interpretation of that phrase. Put in terms of this latter location, these three quotations suggest that “how things seem to you” can be exhaustively characterized by certain “properties, aspects or features” of the tomato, the lime, and so on (Martin), together with the “particular objects”, the tomato and lime themselves (Campbell). Is that list complete? Not quite, as is brought out by Campbell’s ‘how they are arranged’ and McDowell’s ‘tract of the environment’. If we permute the colors in the scene, so that the tomato is green and the lime is red, we have not changed the “presented” properties or objects. But obviously we have changed how things seem. And, equally obviously, this shows that what is missing in the characterization of how things seem to you is that redness qualifies the tomato, and greenness qualifies the lime. Put another way: it’s not enough to include the tomato and redness – we also need to include the fact that the tomato is red.  

Sometimes this point is explicitly acknowledged:

My key claim here is that, whatever the basic ontological structure of the world, our fundamental mode of perceptual contact with that world is with facts – with things bearing properties – not directly with either properties or things simpliciter. (Fish 2009: 53)

We may thus isolate the following presentationalist thesis, strongly suggested by (among others) the above quotations:

TRACT: Visual states in successful perception are characterized by a certain sort of fact, that such-and-such things are arranged thus-and-so, which is (in McDowell’s phrase) “present to consciousness”, and which determines the way things seem.  

So far, we have just discussed the successful (veridical) case. What about unsuccessful cases? They are typically divided into hallucinations and

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8 This is a version of Jackson’s “many-property problem” (Jackson 1975); see also Pendlebury 1990: 222.

9 Another example: Tye 2009: 117.

10 It may help to put TRACT another way (leaving the restriction to successful visual cases tacit): for all worlds w₁, w₂, and subjects S₁, S₂, if the same “tract of the environment”, that things are thus-and-so, is presented to S₁ in w₁ and S₂ in w₂, then the way things seem to S₁ in w₁ is the same as the way things seem to S₂ in w₂.
illusions; for the moment we can ignore hallucinations and focus on illusions, where one sees an object but it is not as it looks.\footnote{Note that illusions are not being defined in terms of ‘looks’: a Rolex knock-off can look expensive, but this is not a visual illusion (Siegel and Byrne 2016: 64–5).}

(Hallucinations will take center stage in Sections 3 and 4.) Due to abnormal lighting or a contrast effect, the tomato may look to have a shade of red, or a particular shape, that it doesn’t in fact have. In such illusory cases, there are no available facts to be present to consciousness and to determine the way things seem.

1.2 The Illusory Case

Granted, there are no available facts, but isn’t a fact just a true proposition? That Obama was born in Hawaii is a fact; since it is also a true proposition, the fact and the proposition are one and the same. And assuming that facts are true propositions, the obvious candidates to characterize illusory visual states are false propositions. Even if the fact that the tomato is crimson is not to be had, the false proposition that the tomato is crimson is there for the taking. This would treat successful and illusory cases of perception in a pleasingly uniform manner, like the orthodox treatment of successful and unsuccessful cases of belief.

However, this move is liable to meet resistance, for instance from Fish:

I am not using the term ‘fact’ in its more linguistic sense, wherein a fact is a true proposition – something that is only contingently true and hence might have been false. I am completely in agreement with Johnston when he claims that, on such an understanding of the term, the claim that sensing is directed at facts would ‘not earn the right to the metaphor of the senses taking in concrete reality’ . . . [because] concrete reality does not consist of items that could have been false. (2009: 53)

As we saw, Fish takes the successful case to involve contact with a fact; he does not extend his view to illusory cases, on the grounds that, in the pertinent sense, facts are not true propositions.

The quoted passage contains two phrases that make Fish’s view seem more plausible than it is. First, ‘linguistic sense’. If facts understood as
true propositions are somehow linguistic, then since facts in one sense are surely not at all linguistic, there must be some other sense of ‘fact’ – just as Fish suggests. But there is nothing (interestingly) linguistic about propositions – the proposition that Obama was born in Hawaii is not constitutively connected to language in any way – and so nothing in the vicinity to suggest that ‘fact’ is not univocal. Second, ‘concrete reality’. That the senses take in “concrete reality” is agreed on all sides. That is, we perceive spatiotemporally located objects and events, the constituents of concrete reality: we see Obama, and Obama speaking. In that same “object” sense of ‘see’, we do not see the true proposition that Obama is speaking. (Hardly surprising, since propositions are not located anywhere.) That might suggest that we are not, after all, in “perceptual contact” with true propositions. But there is no reason to take the “perceptual contact” relation to be that of object-seeing. (Somewhat similarly, there is no reason to take the propositional knowledge relation to be that of personal or acquaintance knowledge.)

Everyone should admit that in one sense facts are true propositions. Since there is little evidence that ‘fact’ is ambiguous, an objector may well concede that the items with which we are in “perceptual contact” are not

12 King disagrees: “there is ample evidence that expressions of the form ‘the fact that . . .’ and ‘the [true] proposition that . . .’ designate different things and that ‘bare’ that-clauses are capable of designating either kind of thing” (King et al. 2014: 68). He adduces three pieces of evidence. First, some that-clauses happily admit ‘the fact that’ (a diagnostic for factive contexts) and some do not (non-factive contexts):

a Jeff regretted the fact that he didn’t go skiing.
b Jeff believed [*the fact] that he didn’t go skiing.

Second, quantification across factive and non-factive contexts:

c *Everything Scott says Jeff discovers.

Third, causation:

d That Scott knocked caused Jeff to open the door.
e The fact that Scott knocked caused Jeff to open the door.
f *The true proposition that Scott knocked caused Jeff to answer the door.

However, these pieces of evidence are more suggestive than compelling. The starred sentences seem anomalous but not false (or not obviously so). If what someone says can’t be discovered, why doesn’t (c) seem false? (Compare ‘Everything Scott proves Jeff disproves’, which does seem false.) For reasons of space this issue will be left unresolved. (For an objection from Soames, see King et al. 2014: 64–5; for King’s reply, see 68–9; for further exchanges, see 177–81 and 201–8.)
facts. Rather, they are fact-like entities, requiring a technical label, say ‘states of affairs’. These “states of affairs” might not be recognized explicitly by ordinary thought and talk but, the defender will insist, are mandated by theoretical reasons – most likely, because true propositions need “truthmakers”.

Whether these theoretical reasons are cogent is disputed. Here we will have to make do with a prima facie case for a propositionalist treatment of both successful and illusory cases. This granted, Tract may be extended to:

SCENE: Visual states (successful or illusory) are characterized by a certain sort of proposition, a scene, that such-and-such things are arranged thus-and-so, which is present to consciousness and which determines the way things seem.

It is worth noting that although SCENE claims a significant respect of overlap between successful and illusory cases, it is compatible with a significant respect of difference. Perhaps in the successful cases one bears a certain relation – call it sensing – to a scene, while in the illusory cases one bears another relation – call it experiencing – to a scene, with sensing and experiencing thought of as analogous to knowing and believing. Thus sensing entails experiencing, but not conversely; sensing is factive, but experiencing is not. SCENE can go a long way toward accommodating the “disjunctivists”, who hold that the successful cases are quite unlike illusions.

1.3 Phenomenological Particularity

SCENE is one of the two main premises in the argument for ordinary objects. To accommodate the eliminativist, ‘successful’ will henceforth mean successful-according-to-the-realist, and ‘illusory’ illusory-according-to-the-realist; accordingly, although the eliminativist might

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13 For an argument that a uniform propositionalist treatment is compatible with taking the successful case to involve a relation to a (non-propositional) state of affairs or truthmaker, see Logue 2014.
15 For a view that dispenses with the analogy and takes sensing and experiencing to be ways of knowing and believing, see Byrne 2016.
16 A qualification: not all disjunctivists put illusions in the right-hand disjunct; some just put hallucinations there (see Byrne and Logue 2008: 60).
deny \textsc{Scene}, he does not deny that there are successful and illusory visual states.

To motivate the other main premise, return to Strawson’s question, “How is it with you, visually, at the moment?” “I see a red bulgy tomato . . .” is incomplete in way we have not yet highlighted. You do not merely see a tomato, you see \textit{this} tomato; you do not see a qualitatively identical tomato in the pantry. Vision presents you with a \textit{particular object}, this tomato; it does not present you with the tomato in the pantry. To borrow a useful expression from Schellenberg, your visual state has \textit{phenomenological particularity}: “it (perceptually) seems to [you] as if there is a particular object present” (2010: 22). Better: it seems to you as if \textit{this} object is present. Accordingly, the environmental fact you sense, that determines the way things seem to you, concerns \textit{this} tomato, not merely some tomato or other.\footnote{A potential source of confusion is the fact that ‘way’-talk, as in ‘the way things seem’, is general, indifferent to the identity of objects. Imagine looking at one tomato (Tom) and then a qualitatively identical tomato (Tim). The presented scene changes: the first presented scene concerns one particular tomato; the second presented scene concerns another. Likewise, “seemings” change, in this sense: it first seems to you as if \textit{this} object (Tom) is present and then it seems to you as if \textit{that} object (Tim) is present. However, the way things seem \textit{doesn’t} change. There is no route back from “the way things seem” to the presented scene, which is why \textsc{Scene} says that the presented scene \textit{determines} the way things seem.}

And similarly in illusory cases. They have phenomenological particularity just like the successful ones. When the tomato looks crimson but isn’t, the ostensible fact that you experience, that determines the way things seem to you, concerns this tomato – although on this occasion the ostensible fact is merely a false proposition. This false proposition is thus \textit{singular} or \textit{object-dependent}. Characterizing object-dependence precisely is a tricky issue that we can leave aside here.\footnote{See Glick 2017.} This plausible claim will suffice: if a scene \textit{p} is object-dependent then \textit{p}’s presentation to \textit{S} entails that there is an object \textit{o} such that \textit{S} is (visually) aware of \textit{o}.

Let us say that an ordinary case is one that is, by realist lights, a case of seeing an ordinary object. So, a plausible accompaniment to \textsc{Scene} is:

\textbf{Object:} If \textsc{Scene} is true, scenes in ordinary cases are object-dependent.