Preface

This is a book about perception and consciousness. It is written for philosophers and for cognitive scientists, but also for artists, and anyone else who is interested in the way we manage to make—or fail to make—sensory contact with the world around us. In it I argue that perception and perceptual consciousness depend on capacities for action and capacities for thought; perception is, I argue, a kind of thoughtful activity.

Philosophy flourishes in the midst of scientific research, not only because philosophical problems are in good measure empirical, but because scientific problems are in good measure philosophical. This book is intended to contribute to the interdisciplinary natural philosophy of mind.

Action in Perception has been written against the background of ongoing collaborations (and friendships) with Evan Thompson, Kevin O'Regan, and Susan Hurley. I would not have written this book if not for these collaborations; I acknowledge my debt to them here.

I first got interested in perception as a B.Phil. student in Oxford in the late eighties. My interest was stimulated by the work of three philosophers whose work I read and with whom I had contact in Oxford: Peter Strawson, John Hyman, and Peter Hacker. The title of this book refers to Strawson’s paper “Causation in Perception.”

I began my own research on perception a few years later, as a graduate student at Harvard. Although this book bears only a distant relation to the dissertation I wrote there under Hilary Putnam, this preface is an appropriate place for me to express my gratitude to him: his insightful criticism, and his energetic example, continue to guide my own work.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to Daniel Dennett, who directs the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts, where I spent a postdoctoral year in 1995–1996. Some preoccupations of this book—for example, Gibson’s
‘ecological’ approach to perception—were topics of our conversations. Dennett repeatedly challenged me to make explicit the significance of these matters for cognitive science. I try to meet his challenge in this book.

Many other people have helped me write this book, either directly, or indirectly.

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I cannot imagine having written this book without Miriam Dym.

I dedicate this book to my father, Hans Noë.

A.N.
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