

Direct realism¹

How do we gain knowledge? If, as Linda Zagzebski suggests, knowledge involves being in ‘cognitive contact’ with reality, what means of being in contact with reality do we have? I don’t mean how we can know what is *inside* our minds, but how we gain knowledge of what is outside our minds.

The most obvious and immediate answer to the question ‘how do we gain knowledge of what is outside our minds?’ is ‘sense experience’ - awareness of physical objects through our senses. Sense experiences are those experiences given to us by our senses - sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, as well as bodily sensations. We can use our senses to perceive the world outside our minds. But *how* does perception by sense experience tell us about the world, and *what* do we learn about the nature of the world using perception? To answer these questions, we will need to think carefully about what sense perception involves.

Philosophers of perception divide into realists and idealists. Realists claim that what we perceive are physical objects, which exist independent of our minds and of our perceptions. Idealists argue that physical objects are not, in fact, independent of our minds. What they are, and so what we perceive, are mental things - ideas of some kind. In this handout, we will look at just one theory of perception: direct realism.

DIRECT REALISM

It is common sense to say that we perceive physical objects, and these exist independently of our minds. ‘Physical objects’ include tables, books, our own bodies, plants, mountains. Cosmology and the theory of evolution suggest that physical objects, such as stars and planets, existed for billions of years before minds existed to experience them. And it is part of our idea of physical objects that they continue to exist when we don’t perceive them. When I leave my study, all the physical objects - the desk, the chairs, the books, and so on - remain just as they are. Physical objects exist objectively in space and time.

Direct realism is the natural starting point for thinking about perception. According to direct realism, what we perceive through our senses are just these very things, physical objects, together with their various properties. When I perceive my desk, for example, I perceive its size, shape, colour, smell and texture (I’ve never experienced its taste, but I could, I suppose!). So, direct realism claims that what we perceive are mind-independent physical objects and their properties. Another way of putting this is to say that the ‘immediate object’ of perception is the

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 66-77

physical object itself. There isn't something else, e.g. a mental image, that we perceive in perceiving physical objects.

Direct realists explain that we can gain knowledge through perception because perception is a form of 'openness' to the world. What perception gives us is a direct awareness of mind-independent objects. Importantly, our awareness of these objects is sensitive to how the objects are - differences in the properties of the objects we perceive will be detected by differences in our perceptual experience of them.

THE ARGUMENT FROM PERCEPTUAL VARIATION

A little reflection suggests that what we perceive isn't quite the same as what is 'out there'. In *The Problems of Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell gives an example of looking at a shiny, brown table. We say it is brown, but it doesn't actually look an even brown colour all over: depending how the light falls, some parts are lighter than others, and some are even white from the shininess. So Russell objects that saying the table is brown means no more than that it looks brown 'to a normal spectator from an ordinary point of view under usual conditions of light' - but why think that this colour is more real, more a property of the table, than any of the other colours that you experience? Just what colour any part of the table looks to you depends on where you stand. If you and someone else look at the table together, you will see different patterns of colour. Suppose a shiny spot on the table looks light brown to you but white to the other person. The table can't *be* both brown and white in the same spot at one time.

Russell then runs the same argument, appealing to variations in our perceptual experience, for the properties of texture and shape. The table might be smooth to touch, but at a microscopic level, there are all kinds of bumps and dips - so should we say that when we touch the table, the smoothness we feel is a property of the table? And the shape that something appears to have, like its colour, varies with the angle from which you view it. A rectangular table, from every angle except 90 degrees, does not look perfectly rectangular.

These examples draw our attention to a distinction between appearance and reality. Obviously, much of the time, we talk as though things are just as they seem. But, clearly, we also distinguish between appearance and reality - and Russell remarks that having any skill as a painter requires that one does.

All this perceptual variation causes a real problem for the direct realist. The direct realist says I perceive physical objects and their properties, in this case the table, 'directly', as they are. The argument from perceptual variation runs like this:

- P1. There are variations in perception.
- P2. Our perception varies without corresponding changes in the physical object we perceive. (For instance, the table remains rectangular, even as the way it looks to me changes as I look at it from different angles.)
- C1. Therefore, the properties physical objects have and the properties they appear to have are not identical.

- C2. Therefore, what we are immediately aware of in perception is not exactly the same as what exists independently of our minds.
- C3. Therefore, we do not perceive physical objects directly.

Sense-data

We now need a name for talking about what we are immediately aware of in perception, e.g. the colour and shape of the table as I see it now. Russell calls these 'sense-data' (singular: 'sense-datum'). When I look at the table, I have a (visual) sensation - I am immediately aware of something. The 'content' of my sensation - what I am immediately aware of - is sense-data (on Russell's view). We can also think of sense-data as appearances (how things appear to us to be).

Sense-data are distinct from the table. The table exists independently of my perception of it, while sense-data are defined as what it is that I perceive - so they depend on my perception. If I close my eyes, the colour and shape of the table as seen by me, cease to exist. And the colour and shape of the table as seen by me varies from where I look at it, while we don't want to say that the table itself varies in this way. We can summarise the argument so far by saying that perceptual variation shows that what we directly perceive are not physical objects, but sense-data.

Response: relational properties

We can challenge Russell's claim that there is no good reason to say that one of the colours we experience the table as having is more real than the others. As he notes, what we *mean* by the colour of an object is the colour that it appears to have when seen by normal observers under normal conditions. That we don't *always* see this colour - that our perception of its colour varies - doesn't show that direct realism is false: we can still say that we see the table, and its colour, under normal conditions. After all, we do all see it as some shade of *brown* (shading to white), rather than some of us seeing it as brown, others as red, others as blue. So, in seeing its colour (as some variant of brown), we see the table and its properties.

With shape, we have an even better reason to privilege the claim that the table is rectangular, rather than obtuse - we can use its shape to perform various actions, like getting it through a narrow doorway, which will only succeed if it *is* rectangular and not obtuse.

But the argument from perceptual variation does show that direct realism needs a more sophisticated account of what it is to see the table and its properties. To develop this, we need to introduce the idea of a 'relational property'. A relational property is a property that something has only in relation to something else (and, in some cases, only in some circumstances). For example, 'being to the north of' is a relational property; Manchester is to the north of London. Another example is 'being in love with'; Jack is in love with Joan. Notice that in these examples, it is Manchester and Jack that have the properties; but we can only say what properties these are by mentioning other things - London and Joan.

In perception, we can be aware of a range of properties, some of which the object has independent of our minds, and some of which it has in relation to being

perceived. For instance, a rectangular table has the property of 'looking obtuse'. The property of 'looking obtuse' is a distinct property from 'being obtuse' - so a table can *be* rectangular and *look* obtuse. The property of 'looking obtuse' is a relational property, in this case, a property the table has in relation to being *seen*. 'Looking obtuse' is a property *the table* has, claims direct realism, not the property of a sense-datum. And we can even explain why the table has the property of looking obtuse (to us) in terms of its being rectangular plus facts about light and vision.

Direct realism can claim that in perceiving physical objects, some of the properties we perceive are relational properties while others are not. It doesn't have to claim that *all* the properties of physical objects, as we perceive them, are mind-independent as long as there is a clear sense in which we are directly aware of physical objects themselves. This response challenges the inference from (C2) to (C3) above.

THE ARGUMENT FROM ILLUSION

We have seen that the appearance/reality distinction challenges direct realism. We can appeal to illusions to press the case. If you look at an oar half-submerged in water, it looks crooked; but it isn't. We see a crooked oar, but the oar isn't crooked. However, *just* from what you experience, you can't tell whether you are seeing an illusion or not. Someone who doesn't know about the illusion thinks they are seeing a crooked oar. It *looks* just like a crooked oar. The point applies generally to illusions. From *just* what we see in an illusion, without other background knowledge, we cannot tell whether what we are seeing is an illusion or not. Illusions can be 'subjectively indistinguishable' from veridical perception. This provides an argument against direct realism.

- P1. We perceive something having some property *F* (e.g. an oar that is crooked).
- P2. When we perceive something as having some property *F*, then there is something that is *F*. (*Something* we see is *F*.)
- P3. In an illusion, the physical object does not have the property *F* (the oar is not crooked).
- C1. Therefore, in illusions, what has the property *F* is something mental, a sense-datum.
- C2. Therefore, in illusions, we see sense-data, and not physical objects, immediately.
- P4. Illusions can be 'subjectively indistinguishable' from veridical perception.
- C3. Therefore, we see the same thing, namely sense-data, in both illusions and veridical perception.
- C4. Therefore, in all cases, we see sense-data, and not physical objects, immediately.
- C5. Therefore, direct realism is false.

Response: relational properties again

Direct realism can give the same reply as before. When the oar in water looks crooked, there is nothing that *is* crooked; (P2) is wrong. Instead, the stick has the property of *looking crooked* when half-submerged in water. There is a difference between the property 'being crooked' and the (relational) property 'looking

crooked'. Usually, of course, something looks crooked when it is crooked. But the two properties can come apart, and something can look crooked when it is straight. So, in illusions, we perceive the 'looks' properties of physical objects, and these 'looks' properties don't match the 'is' properties of the object. But we still directly perceive physical objects and their properties.

THE ARGUMENT FROM HALLUCINATION

We have seen that direct realism can explain the difference between how things are and how they appear to us, in cases of perceptual variation and illusion, by appealing to the 'looks' properties of physical objects. But how can direct realism respond to the challenge of hallucinations? We can experience perceptual hallucinations - not just visual ones, but auditory and olfactory hallucinations as well. As with illusions, hallucinations can be subjectively indistinguishable from veridical perception. But here we can't say that what is seen is how some physical object looks, because no physical object is seen at all! So direct realism's reply to the previous arguments won't work here.

- P1. In a hallucination, we perceive something having some property *F*.
- P2. When we perceive something as having some property *F*, then there is something that is *F*.
- P3. In a hallucination, we don't perceive a physical object at all.
- C1. Therefore, what we perceive must be mental - sense-data.
- P4. Hallucinations can be experiences that are 'subjectively indistinguishable' from veridical perceptions.
- C2. Therefore, we see the same thing, namely sense-data, in both hallucinations and veridical perception.
- C3. Therefore, in all cases, we see sense-data, and not physical objects, immediately.
- C4. Therefore, direct realism is false.

Response: The disjunctive theory of perception

There is another way that direct realism can challenge (P2). If something looks a certain way, then one of *two quite different things* is going on: *either* I directly perceive a mind-independent physical object that is *F* *or* (as in the case of hallucination) it appears to me just *as if* there is something that is *F*, but there is nothing that *is F*.

According to the disjunctive theory of perception, hallucinations and veridical perception are two completely different kinds of mental state, because in hallucination, the person isn't connected up to the world. They can *seem* exactly the same, but that doesn't prove that they *are* the same. The fact that hallucinations are subjectively indistinguishable from veridical perception tells us nothing significant about what *perception* is. In hallucination, we don't *perceive* anything, we *imagine* it. To imagine something is not to perceive something mental, such as sense-data, but not to perceive anything at all. Perception is a relation of the subject to the world, a form of 'cognitive contact'. Hallucination is not.

We can use this to challenge (C2). And so the argument from hallucination doesn't show that in veridical perception, we perceive sense-data instead of physical objects.

THE TIME-LAG ARGUMENT

It takes time for light waves, or sound waves, or smells, to get from physical objects to our sense organs. For example, it takes 8 minutes for light from the sun to reach the earth. If you look at the sun (not a good idea!), you are actually seeing it as it was 8 minutes ago. If it blew up, you would see it normally for 8 minutes after it had blown up - it wouldn't even exist anymore, and you'd still see it! Therefore, we could argue, you aren't seeing it directly.

However, it would be a mistake to think that this shows that what you perceive is a sense-datum of the sun. The 'image' you see is not mental but *physical*, carried in light waves. The light waves exist during those 8 minutes. So *if* you see the sun indirectly, then it is because you see light waves directly. But then what we perceive immediately is not the sun, but the light from the sun. We can generalise: what we perceive is the physical medium by which we detect physical objects (light waves, sound waves, chemicals for smell and taste). So, we don't perceive (ordinary) physical objects directly.

Direct realism can reply that this is a confusion between *how* we perceive and *what* we perceive. Compare these two pairs of questions:

1. 'Can you see the lake?' and 'Can you see the light reflecting off the lake?'
2. 'Can you see the paper?' and 'Can you see the light reflecting from the paper?'

In (1), we can turn our attention from the lake to the light reflecting off it. So we can talk, literally, about seeing the light. But in (2) there is no difference in *what* one is supposed to see. To 'see' the light that the paper reflects is just to see the paper. In fact, you cannot *see* the light itself - only the paper. So, direct realism can argue, except in special conditions, we don't perceive light waves directly and physical objects indirectly. Light waves are part of the story of how we see physical objects.

The time lag involved in how we perceive means we see the physical object as it was a moment before, not as it is now. This means that we literally see (into) the past. We always experience the world as it was a moment ago, or in astronomy, when we look at distant stars and galaxies, we look into the distant past.

DIRECT REALISM AND OPENNESS

We said earlier that direct realism understands perception as 'openness' to the world, a direct awareness of mind-independent objects. We can get a fuller sense of this by trying to describe what we see. We would usually do so by referring to physical objects: 'I see a desk, covered with pens and paper, and a plant'. If we perceive the world via sense-data, the immediate 'content' of what we perceive is

mental. So try to describe your experience in terms of sense-data, without referring to any physical objects. You could talk about 'coloured patches' standing in spatial relations (above, below, left, right, etc.) to each other. But this is very awkward, and it is virtually impossible for any normal scene. What shape is that green patch on the left? - well, 'plant-shaped'! But 'plant' refers to a physical object. So our way of describing sense-data is dependent on concepts of physical objects. We can't give an account of what we experience without referring to physical objects, even if we try.

What this shows is that our perceptual experience presents what we perceive *as* mind-independent objects. That doesn't *prove* that we perceive mind-independent objects, but it does make such a claim highly intuitive. Only direct realism holds onto this basic intuition of 'openness'. It is very counter-intuitive to think, then, that what we perceive are sense-data. Any theory that claims that we perceive sense-data has to say that perception is not what it seems to be. It has to say that it *seems* that we immediately perceive mind-independent objects, but we don't. We need very strong reasons to accept that perception is misleading in this way.