

Indirect realism: objections¹

Indirect realism claims that we perceive physical objects which are mind-independent, but we do so via, or in virtue of, perceiving mind-dependent sense-data that are caused by and represent physical objects. We perceive sense-data immediately, and physical objects indirectly, mediated by our perception of sense-data. In this handout, we raise objections to this theory of perception. For more on indirect realism and sense-data, read the handout 'Indirect realism'.

SCEPTICISM ABOUT THE EXISTENCE OF MIND-INDEPENDENT OBJECTS

In *The Problems of Philosophy*, Russell raises a puzzle for indirect realism. If what we perceive directly are sense-data, then all we know about are sense-data. We believe that 'behind' the sense-data there are real physical objects, that physical objects cause our sense-data. But how can we know this? To know that physical objects cause sense-data, we first have to know that physical objects exist. But the only access we have to physical objects is through our sense-data.

Russell's line of thought forms an objection to indirect realism. Because we directly perceive sense-data, we cannot know that a world of physical objects - a world external to and independent of our minds - exists. Scepticism is the view that we cannot know a particular claim, in this case the claim that physical objects exist. Indirect realism leads to scepticism about the existence of mind-independent objects. And if we can't that physical objects exist, we can't know that sense data are caused by physical objects. But this is a claim that indirect realism itself makes! So if indirect realism is true, we can't know that it is true.

The existence of the external world is the best hypothesis

Russell offers two responses, both appealing to how we should explain what we do know. The first is this:

- P1. The fact that sense-data are private means that no two people actually ever perceive the same thing, unless we can say that there are physical objects that they both perceive (indirectly).
- P2. People have very similar sense-data if they are at the same place and time.
- P3. The best explanation of this is that there are physical objects causing their sense-data: they both perceive the same physical object.
- C1. So physical objects exist.

Russell rejects this argument because it assumes something that we can't know: that there are other people, that they have sense-data, and that their sense-data is similar to mine. To assume that there are other people is to assume that there

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. 83-95

are physical objects, since people are physical objects. But the question was how, from my sense-data, do I know that there are physical objects? In answering that question, I can't assume that there are physical objects (such as other people) - that's begging the question!

So Russell offers a second argument.

- P1. Either physical objects exist and cause my sense-data or physical objects do not exist nor cause my sense-data.
- P2. I can't prove either claim is true or false.
- C1. Therefore, I have to treat them as hypotheses. (A hypothesis is a proposal that needs to be confirmed or rejected by reasoning or experience.)
- P3. The hypothesis that physical objects exist and cause my sense-data is better.
- C2. Therefore, physical objects exist and cause my sense-data.

What is Russell's argument for (P3)? One way to test a hypothesis is to see whether it explains why my experience is the way it is. If I see a cat first in a corner of the room and then later on the sofa, then if the cat is a physical object, it travelled from the corner to the sofa when I wasn't looking. If there is no cat apart from what I see in my sense-data, then the cat does not exist when I don't see it. It springs into existence first in the corner, and then later on the sofa. Nothing connects my two perceptions. But that's incredibly puzzling - indeed, it is no explanation at all of why my sense-data are the way they are! So the hypothesis that there is a physical object, the cat, that causes what I see is the best explanation of my sense-data.

(Russell runs the same argument for supposing that other people have minds. When I perceive how people behave, e.g. when talking to me, the best explanation of my experience is that it is caused by what they say (a physical event) and what they say is caused by their thoughts.)

Two supporting arguments

In *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke offers two arguments that supports Russell's line of thought here. First, he notes that in perception, I cannot avoid having certain sense-data 'produced' in my mind. By contrast, if I turn from perception to memory or imagination, e.g. by shutting my eyes, I find that I can choose what I experience. Perceptual experiences - which 'I have whether I want them or not - must be produced in my mind by some exterior cause' - physical objects.

Second, Locke presents an argument from comparing perceptual experiences from different senses. He notes that our different senses 'confirm' the information that each supplies. If I see a fire and doubt whether it is real, I can confirm its reality by touching it. Another example of this kind was given by Catherine Trotter Cockburn in her 'A letter from an anonymous writer to the author of *The Minute Philosopher*'. She notes that one and the same object causes perceptual experiences through different senses. The experiences themselves are very different, e.g. seeing an object and hearing the sound it makes. But we learn which visual experiences go with which auditory experiences, e.g. seeing a dog

and hearing a dog's bark. With the association made, we can accurately infer from one experience to the other; just from seeing a dog, we know what sound it will make. And if we experience a change in vision, e.g. a train moving from near to far, we can infer the change in sound, e.g. its horn becoming quieter. Why would we be able either to confirm our experiences using different sense, or be able to predict them, unless there is something which both senses perceive but that is independent of being perceived by any particular sense?

Locke brings the two arguments together in an extended example. I know from experience that I can change how a piece of paper looks by writing on it. (This connects sight and proprioception - my sense of my hand moving.) I can plan what to write, and I know in advance what the paper will look like. But I cannot bring about the sense-data of seeing the paper with words on it just by imagination; I have to actually write. And once I have written something, I can't change the words I see. This shows that sense-data aren't 'merely playthings of my imagination'. Finally, if someone else reads those words aloud, what I hear corresponds to what I intended to write. And this 'leaves little reason for doubt' that the words as written on the paper exist independent of my mind.

Discussion

Locke claims to have shown that mind-independent objects exist, that there 'must' be some external cause of sense-data. But this is overstating the case, and Trotter Cockburn is more accurate in talking of inferring such a cause. Both are presenting the same argument as Russell, strengthening it by adding further features of our experience that need explaining. If physical objects don't exist, we can't explain

1. why sense-data aren't under our control but imagination and memory are;
2. why we should get the same information from different senses;
3. why we can infer from perceptual experiences of one sense, e.g. vision, what perceptual experiences we would have in another sense, e.g. audition;
4. the very complex interaction between our actions and our perceptions.

So we have very good reason to claim that physical objects exist and cause our sense data.

The existence of mind-independent objects is not a hypothesis

If indirect realism is correct, then it seems the existence of physical objects remains a hypothesis, something we have to infer. We can argue that this is a significant weakness. First, perhaps some other hypothesis that explains our sense-data is just as good, but we just don't know it. Second, it is very counterintuitive to think that perception doesn't put us in direct touch with physical objects. But this is entailed by the claim that we have to infer the existence of physical objects.

Indirect realism can respond to these objections by rejecting the theories of Russell, Locke, and Trotter Cockburn. They write as if sense-data 'come between' us and the world, with physical objects merely being the cause of sense-data, so that in perceiving sense-data, we aren't also perceiving physical objects. But instead, we should say that we perceive physical objects via sense-data. Sense-

data don't get in the way of perceiving physical objects. They are how we perceive physical objects. They don't block our access to the external world, they mediate it. The existence of the external world is not a hypothesis. It is something that we experience in perception.

But what of the fact that sense-data differ from the physical objects they represent, e.g. in perceptual variation and illusions? Doesn't this show that sense-data come between us and the world? No, this is all explicable in terms of physical objects and their effects on us, and only in these terms. The best explanation of illusions and perceptual variation needs both sense-data and physical objects. We can develop this thought by appealing to how sense-data represent physical objects.

REPRESENTATION, RESEMBLANCE AND THE NATURE OF PHYSICAL OBJECTS

Indirect realism maintains that sense-data are not only caused by mind-independent objects, they also represent them. One way of understanding this is that mind-independent physical objects are like our experiences of them in many respects. Locke says that physical objects 'resemble' our sense-data. For example, physical objects have shape and size, and so resemble my experience of their shape and size. At the very least, we can say that there are systematic correlations between what we experience and the nature of the world. My experience of the shape and size of an object is (at the very least) systematically correlated with what shape and how large the physical object is. Perception is the source of our knowledge of not only the existence of mind-independent objects, but also something of their nature.

This then raises the question, what are physical objects really like? Of all the properties I experience physical objects having, which ones do they have? How should we draw the distinction between the appearance of physical objects and their reality?

Locke answers this question by talking about the primary and secondary qualities of physical objects. he argued that we can distinguish the qualities that we perceive - such things as shape, size, colour, warmth, and so on - into two kinds. Primary qualities are qualities that are 'utterly inseparable' from the object whatever changes it goes through, e.g. even if it is divided into smaller and smaller pieces. The object has these properties 'in and of itself'. The primary qualities are extension (Locke also talks of size), shape, motion, number and solidity. Secondary qualities are qualities that physical objects have that are 'nothing but powers to produce various sensations in us'. Locke lists 'colours, sounds, tastes, and so on', later adding smells and temperature. Secondary qualities as we experience them are nothing like how physical objects are in themselves. However, our experience shows us that physical objects 'in themselves' have primary qualities which we then experience.

But how do we know that physical objects have primary qualities that resemble our experience of them? One difficulty is that, in general, we can't tell what a cause is like just from its effects. Consider: if all you knew was smoke, would you

be able to work out that its cause was fire? Fire is very different from smoke. Experience shows that the world is full of surprising causal relationships. So, if all we experience are sense-data, how can we know whether the world is similar to how it appears to us in sense-data, say in having the primary qualities we experience, or whether it is very different? Can we rule out the claim that physical objects cause our experiences of primary and secondary qualities, but don't resemble these experiences at all?

Berkeley's argument that mind-dependent ideas cannot be like mind-independent objects

As we saw, Locke claims that primary qualities in the object resemble our experience of them. For example, the squareness of a physical object resembles the squareness we see. In his *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, George Berkeley questioned whether this makes sense.

Our experience of the distinction between appearance and reality shows our sense-data change depending on the conditions of perception but the physical object does not. This applies just as much to primary qualities as secondary qualities. For instance, a rectangular table remains rectangular, even as the way it looks to me changes as I look at it from different angles. This is true of the size and shape of almost all the physical objects we commonly perceive. Furthermore, we constantly flit our eyes from one thing to another, so what we experience at any moment changes. Again, we don't take these changes in our sense-data to be the result of changes in the physical objects we are looking at.

This forms the basis of an objection: how can our sense-data, which are 'perpetually fleeting and variable' be 'like' or 'resemble' a physical object is 'fixed and constant'? For instance, how can circular sense-data and oval sense-data both resemble something that has just one shape? If you want to say that one of these appearances resembles the object, while all the others do not, then how do we distinguish which is the 'true copy' - the true size or shape?

Second, physical objects are themselves not something we experience (directly) - we only experience the sense-data that they cause. But how can something that we don't experience (a mind-independent physical object) be like something that is experienced (mind-dependent sense-data)? What can we mean when we say that the shape of the table 'resembles' the shape we see? How can squareness (as it is in the object) resemble the idea of squareness? Our ideas of size, shape, motion and so on, derive from our perceptual experience. The only idea of shape we have is the one we see (or feel). We can only make sense of the table's squareness in terms of our experience of squareness. There is nothing like a perceptual experience except another perceptual experience. So we can't meaningfully say that our sense-data are like or resemble physical objects. But in that case, Berkeley concludes, if indirect realism is true, then we can't know the nature of mind-independent objects.

Indirect realists have generally agreed that Locke's idea of 'resemblance' between sense-data and physical objects is problematic. But, they say, we can still argue that sense-data represent physical objects (just not by resembling them). The pattern of causal relations between the external world and our sense-data is very

detailed and systematic. We can explain how sense-data represent physical objects in terms of this complex causation.

But does this answer the objection? Because causes and effects can be very different, if we understand representation just in terms of detailed and systematic causal relation, it seems that we still won't know what mind-independent objects are like in themselves.