Direct realism

What can sense experience tell us about the world outside our minds? Sense experiences are those given to us by our senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch and bodily sensations. We want to know whether sense experience shows that there is a world of physical objects that exists outside and independently of our minds – the world ‘external’ to our minds; and if it does, what is the best account of how we perceive it? ‘Physical objects’ are the ordinary, everyday things – tables, books, our own bodies, plants – which commonsense says we perceive through our senses (philosophers usually focus on vision, partly because it is our ‘dominant’ sense).

Theories of perception are theories of what and how we can know through sense experience. They can be divided into camps by how they answer the question ‘what do we perceive when we perceive physical objects?’. Realists claim that physical objects exist as things that are independent of our minds and of our perceptions of them. Idealists argue that physical objects, in the sense that realists think of them as independent of our minds, don’t exist at all. The only things we perceive, the only things that exist, are mental; so what we think of as physical objects are actually particular sorts of ideas.

WHAT DO WE PERceive? DIRECT AND REPRESENTATIVE REALISM

Direct realism is the natural starting point for theories of perception. Commonsense suggests that physical objects exist independently of our minds. The theory of evolution suggests that matter existed before minds existed. For billions of years, there were no minds to experience the world; but it existed nevertheless. Direct realists claim that we perceive the physical objects themselves. When we are perceiving the world, it certainly seems to us that we are directly perceiving physical objects that exist independently of our minds.

A little reflection suggests that what we perceive isn’t quite the same as what is ‘out there’. For example, if you put your thumb up against the moon, it looks like your thumb is larger than the moon, but it isn’t. If you move away from a table, you don’t think the table itself gets smaller, even though it looks smaller. Or again, if you look at a red rose in sodium street lights, it looks grey, but the rose itself hasn’t changed. If you half-submerge a straight stick in water and look at it from the side, it looks bent; but it isn’t. So what we perceive in all these cases isn’t the world as it is; but we are still perceiving the world – the moon, the rose, the stick – in some way.

We can put this thought in the form of a question. When we perceive physical objects, do we perceive them ‘directly’ and as they actually are, or do we perceive them ‘indirectly’, in virtue of some representation in our minds? Direct realism claims that the immediate object of perception is the physical object itself. We don’t perceive it in virtue of perceiving something else that ‘mediates’ between our minds and the physical object. Representative realists say that we perceive them ‘indirectly’; what we perceive ‘directly’ is an ‘representation’, a mental image, that exists in our minds but which represents the
physical object. The physical object is perceived ‘via’ this representation. The representation is an ‘appearance’; philosophers have called it a ‘sense-datum’.

DO PHYSICAL OBJECTS HAVE THE PROPERTIES WE PERCEIVE THEM TO HAVE?

If what we perceive is the physical object, then it would seem to follow that the physical object has all the properties we perceive in it. So, I see a brown and black desk, rectangular, about 5 feet long, smelling faintly of factory chemicals. Are all these properties of the desk? Do physical objects have all the properties they appear to have?

This is a question about the distinction between appearance and reality. Obviously, much of the time, we talk as though things are just as they seem. But the three examples above – of your thumb and the moon, of the rose under sodium light, of the stick in water – show that we also distinguish between appearance and reality. And when we do so, then it seems that physical objects do not have exactly the properties they appear to have.

Does this show that direct realism is wrong? Direct realism has sometimes been called ‘naïve realism’, because it seems to take the world at face value. Is it ‘naïve’ in taking physical objects to exist just exactly as we experience them?

DISTANCE AND SIZE

First, the thumb and the moon. Does your thumb really look bigger than the moon? Or is it rather that the moon looks further away? The way our visual system works, it is difficult to separate properties of size from properties of distance. How big something looks, in the usual sense of that phrase, depends on how far away it looks. Something which only takes up a small part of the visual field might actually look huge and very distant. Think of looking at a skyscraper from a distance – does the skyscraper look small?

Direct realists say that you directly perceive the physical object; but this doesn’t mean that every aspect of your perceptual experience is determined by the properties of the physical object itself. For example, in this case, there is also the relative property of its distance from you. We experience both the size of the object and its distance. (The experience – distant things taking up less of the visual field – is also determined by facts about light and our visual system. But these facts aren’t themselves part of the experience – we don’t experience them.) So, to explain your thumb and the moon, we don’t need to say that you are immediately perceiving sense-data, which are different from physical objects. You are directly perceiving physical objects, but you are directly perceiving their distance as well as their size.

We might object that we do not experience distance. Rather, the object does look small but, because we know about distance and size, we judge it to be large and far away. When we don’t know how large something is, we can sometimes wrongly judge it to be small and close, rather than large and distant, or vice-versa. This shows that we don’t experience distance directly, and there is a distinction between how big it seems and how big it is. To account for this, we need sense-data.
ILLUSIONS
When we look at the stick half-submerged in water, we see a bent stick. But the stick isn’t bent. So what is? We see something bent, but it isn’t the stick. So it must be a sense-datum. We have a mental image of a bent stick; the stick in the image is bent. But that means that we don’t see the real stick directly; we see it indirectly, via sense-data. So direct realism is false, and representative realism must be right.

We must admit that in cases of illusion, we do not see the object as it is. The stick isn’t really bent. So the object doesn’t have the property that it appears to have.

 Replies
The first reply from direct realism accepts that if something looks bent, then something is bent; and since the stick isn’t, I am seeing a sense-datum. But this doesn’t make representative realism true as a general theory of perception. The reason is that cases of illusion and of veridical perception are quite different. In illusions, I see a sense-datum, but in veridical perception, I see physical objects. So direct realism is true for normal perception.

This view says if it looks to me as if something is F (a stick is bent) then either there is something that is F that I see or it is, for me, just as if there is something that is F. (An either/or claim is called a disjunction, so this theory is called ‘disjunctivism.’) In the first case, I see the world as it is; in the second case, I see sense-data. But just because I see sense-data in cases of illusion doesn’t mean I see sense-data, rather than the world, in cases of veridical perception. Illusions and veridical perception are two completely different kinds of mental state. (Of course, they can seem exactly the same to the person who experiences an illusion without knowing it; but that doesn’t prove that they are the same.)

The second explanation rejects the claim that if it looks to me as if something is F, then there is something that is F. When the stick in water looks bent, there is nothing that is bent. Instead, the stick has the property of looking bent when half-submerged in water. The property of ‘looking bent’ is a distinct property from ‘being bent’. It is a relational property, a property the stick has in relation to being seen by us. But because it is a property the stick has, we don’t need to say that sense-data exist. There is a real difference between the property ‘being straight’ and the property ‘looking straight’. Usually, of course, something looks straight when it is straight. But the two properties can come apart, and something can look bent when it is straight. So, physical objects don’t always have the properties they appear to have, but that doesn’t make direct realism false.

HALLUCINATION
In the case of hallucinations, there is no physical object that ‘looks’ a certain way, because there is no physical object at all! However, following the lead of disjunctivists, all direct realists argue that we can’t generalize from hallucinations to perception generally, i.e. we can’t use hallucinations to argue that we always perceive sense-data. Just because they seem similar subjectively doesn’t mean the same thing (seeing sense-data) is going on. Hallucination and perception are different types of mental state, because in hallucination, the person isn’t connected up to the world.

But this doesn’t tell us what we do see in cases of hallucination. Disjunctivists can say that in hallucinations, as in illusions, we perceive sense-data. The other direct realists can’t.
However, they can compare cases of hallucination with *thoughts about* objects that don’t exist. For example, I can think that unicorns are white; but unicorns don’t exist. What do I think is white when I think ‘a unicorn is white’? Just the unicorn – which doesn’t exist. Suppose now I hallucinate seeing a white unicorn. What have I seen that is white? Again, just the unicorn; no physical object ‘looks white’ or ‘looks like a unicorn’ in this hallucination. Whatever explains how unicorns can be white without existing will also explain hallucinations of white unicorns.

An objection to this is that it is one thing to *think about* unicorns, and quite another to think you are *seeing* a unicorn. In the hallucination, it seems you are confronted, in your consciousness, with an example of something white. The experience is quite different from thinking about something white. Again, the defenders of sense-data will say, in a hallucination of something white, something must *be* white; in a thought of something white, nothing needs to be white. And this difference arises from how different it is to have a hallucination from having a thought.

**THE CONTENT OF SENSE EXPERIENCE**

Direct realists claim that we perceive the world directly, not via sense-data. It doesn’t understand sense experiences as mental *things*. Of course, in perceiving the world, we experience it. But we shouldn’t say that we perceive the world in virtue of perceiving sense-data. If we want to say we ‘have experiences’ of the world, we shouldn’t say we *perceive* the experience; we *have* it, thereby perceiving the object. Or better still, experiences aren’t ‘things’; we *experience*, and in virtue of experiencing, we perceive the object. We do not perceive a mental thing.

One argument for direct realism comes from considering how we describe what we see. Try to describe what you see. Of course, you would usually do so by referring to physical objects: ‘I see a desk, covered with pens and paper, and a plant’. But if you perceived the world via sense-data, the immediate ‘content’ of what you perceive is mental. So try to describe your experience in terms of sense-data, without referring to any physical objects? For example, you could talk about ‘coloured patches’ standing in spatial relations (above, below, left, right, etc.) to each other. However, it turns out that this is virtually impossible for any normal scene. What shape is that coloured 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.

Direct realists argue that this shows that our epistemic ‘access’ to physical objects is direct. If we immediately perceived sense-data, we should be able to describe them in themselves, as coloured patches, without using concepts that refer to physical objects. But we can’t. We can’t make sense of sense-data, without relying on physical objects. So we can’t use sense-data to explain our experience of physical objects.

Here’s a parallel example: if you want to explain how a light bulb works, you need to refer to electricity. If you then tried to explain electricity just as ‘it’s what makes light bulbs work’, you wouldn’t have explained anything: ‘light bulbs work by the stuff that makes light bulbs work’! So you need an independent explanation of electricity. It’s the same with sense-data and physical objects. Suppose you explain your perception of the physical objects you see in terms of sense-data. You then need an independent account of the sense-data you are experiencing. But this is what you can’t have – you can’t describe
the sense-data without referring to the physical objects. This at least suggests that what we experience are physical objects, not sense-data.