

## Experience and Reality – with particular reference to vision

Our perceptual experience of the world is one thing. How the world is in itself independent of our experience is another thing. How is our conscious experience related to mind-independent reality? More particularly, is there actually a mind-independent reality, or is everything mental? In this introduction I will focus on vision, but vision is only one of the five senses, so feel free to bring up considerations relation to hearing, smelling, touching and tasting.

Philosophers have proposed three different theories of perception to account for the relationship between our experiences and the reality of the world outside ourselves. These are: (1) direct realism; (2) indirect realism; and (3) idealism (or phenomenalism). There have been different versions of these three theories, and things tend to get complicated fairly quickly, but as a starting point, here are rough characterisations of these three theories.

**Direct Realism** There is an external world independent of our minds ('realism') and we experience this world directly ('direct'), without experiencing an intermediary first (an idea, an image, or sense datum)

**Indirect Realism** There is an external world independent of our minds ('realism') but we experience this world indirectly ('indirect'), via experiencing an intermediary first (an idea, an image, or sense datum). So we experience something in our head directly and only perceive what is outside our heads indirectly.

**Idealism (also called phenomenalism)** There is no external world independent of our minds (rejection of realism). We experience ideas/images/sense data directly.

Indirect realism was the dominant theory of perception from the time of the enlightenment (Descartes and Locke were the prime motivators for this theory) up until the late twentieth century, when direct realism came to dominate more and more (at least in English-speaking analytic philosophy). Idealism was first associated with George Berkeley and in the twentieth century with Alfred Ayer. As indirect realism came first, I'll start with that. For reasons of time, I'll focus on arguments for and against indirect realism. Direct realism and idealism are options if we find indirect realism untenable.

### Seven arguments for indirect realism

1: Two people, aware of the same object, will be in different perceptual states. The content of the perceptual state is the direct object of awareness.

2: The time-lag argument. Suppose I look into the night sky and see a distant star. Suppose the star is so far away it takes three years for the light to travel from the star to earth. Suppose, further, the star burned itself out a year ago. Now I can't be seeing the star directly as it no longer exists. Therefore I must be seeing it indirectly by perceiving an inner item directly. The same applies to all physical objects, as the light from them takes a finite time to arrive at my eyes.

3: The argument from illusion. Genuine perceptual experiences are qualitatively indistinguishable from illusory experiences at the relevant time. The strongest form of this argument is the case of hallucination. Consider this thought experiment. Think of Macbeth when he hallucinates the bloody dagger before him. Macbeth has a twin brother O'Beth who is in a situation where he sees a real bloody dagger before him. In hallucination, there obviously is an inner item Macbeth is aware of, so the same inner item is present in the case of O'Beth who sees a real bloody dagger.

4: Given the enormous complexity of the causal process of vision, as revealed by neurophysiology, how can we claim we perceive the external object directly?

5: The table is really just a mass of atoms arranged into molecular structures. So the table really is colourless because the atoms are colourless. But we see a coloured table, so we really perceive our sense data.

6: The table can appear differently coloured in different lighting conditions, so it has no real colour. What we are really aware of is not the colour of the object, but an item in our visual field.

7: The penny appears now round, now elliptical, now rectangular. So although the sense datum changes, the real shape causing the sense datum remains the same. Hence what we are directly aware of is not the actual object.

### **Replies to the seven arguments**

1 and 7: These can be taken together as 7 is just a special case of 1. To say 'The penny appears elliptical' is not to say 'There really is some inner elliptical object which we see, namely an 'appearance''. Direct realism can also give an account of the evident facts that things look different from angles and in different lighting conditions.

2: This argument assumes that the direct object of perception must be present at the moment of perception. But why must this be the case? We hear directly the distant thunder, don't we? The word 'present' is ambiguous here. It can either mean that which is not absent (temporally or geographically) or that which is presented, that of which we are directly aware.

3: Macbeth – It seems to him just as if he is seeing a bloody dagger; so he is certainly having a visual experience. But this does not imply that he is really aware of some *thing* which really exists, an inner object. So we don't have to accept the inference from (1) to (2) here: (1) Macbeth and O'Beth both have a visual experience as of a bloody dagger (true); (2) Macbeth and O'Beth both have awareness of the same inner object (possibly not true).

4: We can all agree that retinal images and neuronal firings in the brain are causally necessary for visual experience. However we are not consciously aware of these bodily states and brain processes. So neurophysiological processes do not function as intermediary direct objects of perception.

5: What can justify the premise that the table is really colourless? Just because the atoms aren't coloured doesn't mean the table can't be. Similarly, just because H<sub>2</sub>O molecules aren't wet we cannot conclude that water isn't really wet.

6: This argument is wrong because we call the colour that an object is in normal conditions (e.g. out of doors on a sunny day) its real colour. This can explain its colour in abnormal conditions, but not vice-versa.

### **Direct realism and the explanation of perceptual error**

There is a danger that in attempting an explanation of perceptual error, direct realism will eventually collapse into indirect realism. The indirect realist says that perceptual error involves a mismatch between perceptual state and outer object. For example, between a blue sense datum and an oblong green box. So there are two things: the inner perceptual state (or inner object) and the outer physical object. How can the direct realist respond here? There are two alternative ways the direct realist can go – externalism and internalism.

**1: Externalist.** In perception, there is no such thing as a perceptual state whose nature is logically independent of the existence of the object it seems to be a perception of. There is no residue of that state, common to perceptual and hallucinatory states, and describable without reference to its object.

Though we may not be able to tell whether we are seeing or hallucinating, that does not mean that the two situations share a common core. Rather, the two situations are different despite being (sometimes) indistinguishable. Seeing is a state of mind only available when there is a suitable external object. Whether one is in that sort of state depends on the existence of a suitable object.

**2: Internalist.** The hallucinator has a perceptual experience; he is in some perceptual state, and this perceptual state must be given an independent characterisation, one which has no implications whatever for the nature of the surrounding physical world. The hallucinator and the non-hallucinator are in the same perceptual state. What account can we give of these perceptual states which doesn't turn them into inner objects of awareness?

One might use Robert Chisholm's 'Adverbial Theory of Sensation' to avoid commitment to inner objects. So, for example, instead of viewing pains as inner items we could equate 'I have a pain' with 'I sense painfully'.

Here we analyse the *content* of a visual experience as a *way* of being aware. Instead of experiencing a sense datum with property P, we talk of sensing P-ly. This allows the direct realist to avoid inner objects of awareness, but keeps states of awareness. For example, instead of 'I perceive a blue square sense datum', we say 'I sense bluely and squarely'.

But taking a state to be a way of being aware of the world does not make clear the idea of a mismatch between state (i.e. being aware) and the world. It would be better if we think of perception as being (at least in part) the acquisition of belief or at least a tendency to form a belief. Now we have an account of a mismatch between perceptual state and the world in the case of perceptual error. This is a mismatch between a belief and the world that occurs when the belief is false. Macbeth and O'Beth both come to form a belief that there is a dagger in front of them. Macbeth's belief is false, O'Beth's is true.

## **Idealism**

If we think both versions of direct realism and indirect realism are untenable, there is one other place to go to – idealism. This position is attractive if we think the idea of the physical world is not motivated if we cannot access it or imagine it. If we only have access to our inner perceptual states then perhaps the world is made up of mental items like the sense data we know well.

George Berkeley held that 'to be is to be perceived' and he argued that the items of our everyday world only exist as long as they are perceived by a mind or soul. When pressed on whether the university quad would go out of existence when all the university staff and students were asleep, he said God would still be around to perceive the quad.

Without God, the idealist can fall back on the view that items of our everyday world exist as long as they actually are perceived or would be perceived if a suitable subject was around to perceive them. So, idealists appeal to a permanently true subjunctive conditional. So the coffee cup in front of me exists if in suitable conditions a person would perceive it.

The weakness of idealism is that these subjunctive conditionals don't seem to be explanatorily satisfactory. We want to know what makes these subjunctive conditionals true. The realist can appeal to the continued existence of physical objects, even when nobody is about. The idealist cannot say this as he has rejected physicalism.

### **Further Reading**

**Introductory:** <https://philosophyalevel.com/aqa-philosophy-revision-notes/theories-of-perception/>

**Advanced:** <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/perception-problem/>

**Book:** *Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology*, Jonathan Dancy (Specifically chapters 10 and 11, but the whole book is worth reading as an introduction to the central topics of analytic philosophy.)