Direct and indirect realism
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1. What do we perceive?

The 17th-century philosopher John Locke made a famous distinction between primary and secondary qualities of physical objects. Many people misunderstand this distinction as the one that Plato makes in the *Protagoras*. Plato presents an argument that ‘heat’ isn’t a real property of an object, since what is hot to one person is not. By contrast, we might think that ‘being two feet long’ is a property of an object, since this doesn’t vary from one person to another. So Plato is making a distinction between appearance (e.g. heat) and reality (e.g. size).

Locke also wants to make a distinction between appearance and reality, but in a different way. For Locke, primary qualities are those properties of an object that are not related by definition to perceivers. Examples include size, mass, and shape. We might say that the object has these properties ‘in and of itself’. By contrast, secondary qualities, such as colour and smell, are related to perceivers. Colour, by definition, is something that is experienced in vision. So it is a property that an object can have only in relation to its being seen by someone.

Some philosophers have argued that secondary qualities do, in fact, vary from person to person – what you see as bright red, I see as slightly darker red, and so on. In this way, they argue that primary qualities are ‘more real’ than secondary qualities (which leads to the confusion between Locke and Plato). But Locke didn’t argue this. He thought that objects really do have secondary qualities; just that they have them in relation to being perceived. What we experience (a red vase or a smelly cheese), he claimed, resembles the physical object (the vase or cheese as it is ‘in and of itself’). We perceive the physical object ‘via’ the way it appears to us.

What does ‘via’ mean? The 18th-century philosopher Bishop George Berkeley argued that, strictly speaking, we don’t perceive the vase at all – we perceive the colour and shape of the vase. Likewise, we don’t hear a car coming down the road; we hear the sound of the car. This seems to rule ‘direct realism’ (the theory that we perceive physical objects ‘directly’) out of court. A better way of expressing this is that we see the vase in virtue of seeing its colour and shape. The question then is, is the appearance of the vase something mental that we perceive ‘immediately’ (indirect realism) or can we still say we perceive the vase itself (direct realism)? Locke thought the first option was correct.

2. A preliminary case for indirect realism

What evidence supports Locke’s position? Indirect realists often ask us to consider hallucination and perceptual illusions. In hallucinations, you see something, but nothing which exists. In illusions, you see something, but not as it really is e.g. a straight stick in water appears bent. In each case, what you see, they claim, is a mental thing, an appearance, a ‘sense-datum’. In cases of accurate (‘veridical’) perception, we can use these points to make a similar distinction between the physical object and its ‘appearance’, which is a mental thing. We can then say that what we perceive ‘immediately’ is the appearance, which has secondary qualities; and that it is by
perceiving the appearance that we perceive the physical object, which has only primary qualities. So we see the appearance of the vase, which is a mental thing which really is red; and this way, we indirectly see the vase, which is a physical thing which isn’t really red, but creates an appearance of being red.

3. Objections to indirect realism

Locke and other indirect realists claim that, in veridical perception, the appearance or sense-datum resembles the physical object (in illusions, there is some important lack of resemblance). But what does it mean to say that something which is mental and coloured ‘resembles’ something which is physical and not coloured (in and of itself)? Locke might appeal to primary qualities – the shape of the sense datum is the same as the shape of the object. But this isn’t true: first, the apparent shape of something changes from different angles (e.g. a circle looks oval unless you look at it head-on); second, sense-data, being mental things, don’t occupy space the way that physical objects do – so they don’t have shape or size in exactly the same way physical objects do. Locke is confusing the mental thing (the image which doesn’t have size or shape) with what it represents (the physical object which does).

In fact, since physical objects – according to indirect realism – are so different from what we perceive them to be, on what basis do we think they exist at all? How can we prove that physical objects cause us to experience sense-data? Any experiences we have in trying to prove this will only result in experiences of sense-data; we can never experience physical objects directly. All we can say is that there are certain correlations between sense-data themselves (this is Ayer’s theory of perception, called linguistic phenomenalism).

Third, sense-data, as mental things, belong to the mind that experiences them. That means that when we look at the ‘same’ table, we actually see different things – I see my sense-data and you see yours. This is counterintuitive; we want to make sense of the idea that we do, literally, see the same thing, not just that there are ‘similarities’ between what you see and what I see.

Finally, can we even make sense of the idea of sense-data as mental things? For example, can my sense-data have properties I’m not aware of? When I see a pile of matches, how many are there in the sense-datum? If we say it is a determinate number, then why can’t I say what that determinate number is? If we say there is not a determinate number of matches in the sense-datum, how can we make sense of the idea that something exists with indeterminate properties?

4. Direct realism

Direct realism must answer the argument from illusion. It must admit that in cases of illusion, we do not see the object (as it is). Recent direct realists have argued that although this is true – what we see in illusions is appearance – it doesn’t follow that in veridical perception, we also only see appearance. They claim that when we perceive we either see ‘mere’ appearance or we see the object itself, unmediated by appearance.

Before evaluating this claim, let’s look at an argument for direct realism. Try to describe what you see. We all, automatically, tend to describe what we see in terms of physical objects – ‘I see a brown deer’, not ‘I see a brown, deer-shaped patch’. And even to understand our description of coloured ‘patches’, we normally have to rely on our description of objects (‘deer-shaped’). We can’t make sense of sense-data, because we can’t describe sense-data without presupposing direct
access to physical objects. Furthermore, when we perceive, what we perceive is perceived as existing independently of us, outside our mind. If we perceived sense-data, this wouldn’t be true.

So what is the relationship between the appearance of the object and the object itself? Direct realists give one of two different responses. The first response is that when we say we perceive the object ‘in virtue of’ perceiving the appearance of the object, ‘appearance’ really means ‘aspect’. We perceive an aspect of the object (e.g. a certain side from a certain angle). But ‘aspects’ aren’t mental; rather, the physical object has ‘aspects’. Since aspects are distinct from the physical object, we don’t perceive physical objects by perceiving something mental. We perceive the physical object directly.

The second response is that instead of saying we perceive the object in virtue of perceiving the appearance of the object, we should say that we perceive the object in virtue of having certain experiences of it. But we don’t 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.

But what about illusions? Recall that Locke’s original idea of secondary qualities was that the physical object has these qualities, just as much as it has primary qualities, only that it has these qualities in relation to being perceived. So we can rightly say we perceive the object when we perceive it with its secondary qualities. Could we say something about illusions, viz. that the physical object has the property of how it appears under certain circumstances (sticks have the property of looking bent when partially immersed in water)?

This still leaves the case of hallucinations. If the stick doesn’t exist at all, how can ‘it’ be said to have the property of looking a certain way? Things that don’t exist don’t have properties! Or do they? Philosophers have tried to deal with cases of hallucination by comparing them with objects of thought that don’t exist. Unicorns are white; but unicorns don’t exist. Likewise, I can say that, in the hallucination, the stick looks brown, even though the stick doesn’t exist. Whatever explains how unicorns can be white without existing, will also explain hallucinations.

**Further reading**

Burns & Law, *Philosophy for AS and A2*, Ch. 1
Baggini, *Philosophy: Key Themes*
Crane, T. *Elements of Mind*, Ch. 5
Bennett, J. *Locke, Berkeley, Hume*, Ch. 4