Representative 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.

REPRESENTATIVE REALISM

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’.

Arguments in favour of representative realism can begin as objections to direct realism. Representative realists argue that they have a good explanation of our three examples above (thumb, rose, stick). There is a distinction between how the world is and how we perceive the world to be, but it still makes sense to say we perceive the world. We perceive it ‘indirectly’. What is immediately present to our consciousness, what we perceive ‘directly’, is a representation of the world, a sense-datum.
If the rose looks grey, but it isn’t, what is that we are seeing that is grey? If the stick isn’t bent, then what is it that is bent? Representative realists say it is the sense-datum of the rose that is grey, the sense-datum of the stick that is bent. Sense-data, then, are mental things which are the way we perceive them to be. They are ‘appearances’. When we are perceiving the world, we perceive it via the sense-data that represent objects in the world. This representation can be accurate or inaccurate in certain ways.

Cases of hallucination support the case for sense-data still further. If I hallucinate seeing an elephant, there is nothing in the world that I am seeing as an elephant. So what is it that looks like an elephant? It can only be something mental, viz. the sense-datum of an elephant.

**SENSE-DATA AND PHYSICAL OBJECTS**

It is worth taking a moment just to list the essential characteristics of sense-data in contrast to physical objects. These essential properties feature importantly in the argument which we have just seen, that sense-data are needed to explain perception, and also in the objections that will be raised to sense-data.

Sense-data are mental things – they exist as part of the mind. Physical objects, by contrast, exist physically. It is perhaps unclear what it means to say that something exists ‘mentally’ – is the mind a thing? We don’t need to settle that here. The important point is that sense-data have at least these three important properties that physical objects do not:

1. Sense-data are ‘private’. No one else can experience your sense-data. They are the particular sense-data they are, by definition, as part of your consciousness. By contrast, physical objects are ‘public’. One and the same table can be experienced by different people.
2. Sense-data only exist while they are being experienced. An experience must be experienced by someone to exist at all. A physical object, such as a table, can exist when no one experiences it.
3. Sense-data are exactly as they seem. As we said above, they are ‘appearances’. There is no further reality to an appearance than how it appears. (Otherwise, you would have to ask whether you perceived the appearance as it appears or as it really is!) Physical objects can appear differently from how they really are (e.g. the stick in water). They have a reality which is not defined by appearance.

**FROM ILLUSION TO A THEORY OF PERCEPTION**

In cases in which the world isn’t the way we perceive it to be, it looks like we need to say we perceive sense-data. But, argue representative realists, there is really no difference between these cases and cases in which the world is the way we perceive it to be. If someone didn’t know that straight sticks look bent in water, when he looked at such a stick, it would seem to him as though he was looking at a bent stick. And when you are in the grip of a hallucination, you don’t know you are hallucinating. You can’t tell, just by how it seems, whether you are perceiving an illusion, perceiving the world the way it really is, or hallucinating. But then, if we are perceiving sense-data in the cases of illusion and hallucination, yet subjectively we can’t tell the difference between these cases and cases in which we perceive the world as it is, we should say we are perceiving sense-data in every case. We can’t tell the difference is because we see the same thing in both cases,
viz. sense-data. And likewise in hallucinations: why is it that we can describe both a hallucination, e.g. of an elephant, and a perception of an elephant in exactly the same way unless they have something in common? So we don’t just perceive sense-data in these cases of illusion and hallucination; we always perceive sense-data. In veridical perception, we perceive the world ‘in virtue of’ perceiving sense-data (‘veridical’ means accurate, not mistaken, telling or showing the truth).

DO SCEPTICAL ARGUMENTS ESTABLISH SENSE-DATA?
The rest of this handout follows the handout on ‘Primary and secondary qualities’. You should read that handout first.

Perceptual variation
The argument from perceptual variation, presented as an objection to direct realism, is equally an argument in favour of representative realism. We perceive (at least) secondary qualities, such as colour, temperature, and taste differently. The air can feel warm to me, but cool to you. This can be explained if these qualities are not part of the objects we perceive, but part of our perceptions of them. The air ‘itself’ is neither warm nor cool (though its heat can be measured physically in calories), but only feels warm or cool. So how we perceive the air is not how it is itself. How warm it feels is part of our representation of the air. So we must perceive the air via sense-data, and secondary qualities are aspects of sense-data.

In fact, you can run the argument from perceptual variation with primary qualities as well. If you look at a circle straight on, it looks circular. But if I’m looking at it from an angle, it looks elliptical. We see it differently, but it doesn’t change. So we must perceive it via sense-data; your sense-data look circular, mine look elliptical. As we saw in above, this causes trouble for representative realism: how do we know what the world beyond our experience is really like? The argument from perceptual variation begins by supporting representative realism, but turns into an objection to it.

Time lag
A different argument from science relates to time lags. 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 other. If you look at the sun (not a good idea unless it’s an eclipse!), you are actually seeing it as it was 8 minutes ago. For example, 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.

Does this show, however, that what you perceive is actually sense-data? It’s hard to see why. The ‘image’ you see of the sun is physical, i.e. carried in light waves. The light waves exist during those 8 minutes – it is not as though the light from the sun immediately causes sense-data, but your sense-data are delayed by 8 minutes! So if you see the sun indirectly, then it is because you see light waves directly.

This isn’t the conclusion representative realism was after. The argument from time lags seems to show that we perceive the physical medium by which we detect physical objects (light waves, sound waves, chemicals for smell and taste), not that we perceive sense-data. However, it does suggest that we don’t perceive physical objects directly.
But, direct realism can reply, this is a confusion. What science tells us here is how we perceive (we perceive visually by detecting light waves, we perceive aurally by detecting sound waves, and so on). It doesn’t tell us what we perceive. Compare these two pairs of questions: 1. ‘Can you see table?’ and ‘Can you see the light reflecting from the table?’; 2. ‘Can you see the lake?’ and ‘Can you see the light reflecting off the lake?’.

In (1) there is no difference in what one is supposed to see. To ‘see’ the light the table reflects is just to see the table. In fact, you cannot see the light itself; only the table. To see light, rather than to see by means of light, requires special conditions. (2) picks these out; you turn your attention to something different in response to the two questions. So, direct realism can argue, we don’t perceive light waves directly and physical objects indirectly. Light waves are part of the story of how we see physical objects.

But surely the time lag means we see the physical object as it was a moment before, not as it is now. This means that if we see it, we see it in the past – so we see into the past?! Well, perhaps so. We always experience the world as it was a moment ago. A strange, but not impossible, conclusion.

**COULD WE KNOW OF A RELATION BETWEEN SENSE-DATA AND PHYSICAL OBJECTS?**

If we don’t directly perceive physical objects, but only sense-data, how is it that we can think about a world ‘beyond’ sense-data? On what grounds is representative realism realist? Can we know what the world of physical objects is really like? In fact, can we know that it even exists?

**Resemblance and representation**

We could argue that we know what the world is like, and that it exists, because sense-data resemble the world in primary qualities, but not secondary qualities.

But both Hume and Berkeley disagree. Berkeley pointed out that Locke was wrong to say that the appearance resembles the object in its primary qualities, but not in its secondary. For example, circles do not look circular when viewed from an angle, they look oval. So the lack of resemblance applies to both primary and secondary properties. There is no more constancy in one than the other.

Second, Berkeley argued, you can’t say that two things resemble each other unless you can compare them. But you can never compare the physical object to the sense-data, since you only ever perceive sense-data immediately. We can’t say that physical objects have any of the qualities we perceive, including size and shape, because the only basis for doing so is our experience of the sense-data. We don’t know that physical objects have size and shape unless we know our sense-data resemble them; but we don’t know whether our sense-data resemble them unless we can say they have size and shape!

To reply to these objections, representative realists dropped the idea of ‘resemblance’ in favour of ‘representation’. They emphasise the other part of Locke’s theory, that sense-data are caused by physical objects; and this causation is very detailed and systematic. Yes, if you turn a penny, it looks circular, then increasingly oval, then flat (from the side). But all of these sense-data represent the penny because they are very systematically related to it. We can explain representation in terms of this complex causation. What remains central to representative realism is that we perceive the world via sense-data.
What causes experience?

But, Hume argues, how can we even know that physical objects exist, and cause our sense-data? From the sense-data themselves, how can we tell what, if anything, causes them? We can't: all that perceptual experience is the sense-data, not any connection between sense-data and physical objects. Since we only ever experience sense-data ‘immediately’, if there were no physical objects, how would we know? It wouldn’t seem any different if our sensations were caused by a computer; or were not caused at all, but just ‘happened’.

In order to know that physical objects cause our 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. So, in fact, we cannot know that a world of physical objects exists independently of our sense-data. At best, then, saying that physical objects exist is a hypothesis, a theory to explain our sense-data.

Physical objects

As we have seen, many representative realists claim that secondary qualities are subjective, and only primary qualities are real. But Berkeley argued that we cannot form a conception of a physical object that has primary properties alone. For example, we can’t conceive of something as merely having size and shape, it must have colour as well (try imagining a shape of no colour). However, Locke agrees that we can’t conceive of something as merely having size and shape. But rather than colour, Locke argues the other property we need is solidity, which is a primary property. We can have a coherent conception of something as simply extended and solid without having any further secondary qualities. Colour is not necessary – just ask any blind person!

Hume, meanwhile, says that while everyone accepts that secondary qualities do not properly belong to physical objects, but are ‘in the mind’, we have no reason to suppose that the same is not true of primary qualities. These are equally derived from our senses, and all that we are given in experience is the sense-data themselves. Perhaps nothing in the object resembles squareness, just as nothing resembles redness. Perhaps our experiences of both are caused by something quite different. Going just on sense-data, how could we know? As Berkeley argued above, you can’t know that two things resemble each other unless you can compare the, and we can’t compare sense-data and physical objects.

Replies

Representative realists respond to both these objections, that we can’t know what physical objects are like or whether they exist, by saying they misunderstand sense-data. The objections wrongly assume sense-data ‘come between’ us and the world. In fact, we perceive the world via sense-data, which are the ‘medium’ by which we perceive the world.

Compare: we describe the world using words. But words don’t get in the way of describing the world. We couldn’t describe the world without them! Sense-data don’t get in the way of perceiving the world. They are how we perceive the world. They don’t block our access to the world, they mediate it. The world is still what we perceive; and so it is not a hypothesis.
But what of the fact that sense-data differ from the physical objects they represent (think of the bent stick again)? Doesn’t this show that sense-data come between us and the world? No, replies representative realism; this is all explicable in terms of physical objects, and their effects on us, and only in these terms. In other words, in order to properly explain illusions, secondary qualities, perceptual variation, and all the rest, we need both sense-data and physical objects.

**SENSE-DATA ARE IMPOSSIBLE**

When we try to get clear on exactly what sense-data are, and what properties they are said to have, the concept can become more confused instead of less. Locke seems to claim that sense-data have the very properties that the objects they represent do. So a sense-datum of a yellow square is itself square and yellow. The object ‘in itself’ is square, so the sense-datum and the object resemble each other; but the object ‘in itself’ isn’t yellow, so the sense-datum doesn’t resemble it. But how can sense-data be literally square or yellow? A sense-datum isn’t in space, it doesn’t take up space, so how can it be square? And how can something mental actually be yellow? Ideas and experiences can’t really be coloured. As mental things, sense-data can’t resemble what the physical objects represent at all.

This is a very strong objection to the argument that representative realism used to argue for the existence of sense-data. If the rose looks grey, it said, there must be something that is grey. But, the objection claims, how can anything mental actually be grey? Certainly, something is represented as looking grey. But that ‘something’ that is represented as grey is the rose itself.

Representative realists point out a difficulty with this objection. If the rose isn’t grey, and there is no sense-datum which is grey, how is it possible that I see a (rose-shaped) patch of grey? Surely it is true that if I see grey, then something must be grey. If it isn’t the rose, then it must be something mental.

There is a second objection that sense-data just don’t make sense. Sense-data are said to be exactly how they seem; they are appearances. So it seems that my sense-data can’t have properties that I am not aware of. But consider looking at a scattered pile of matches on the table, I don’t know how many. How many matches are there in my sense-datum? Is it the same number as on the table? But then why don’t I know how many matches there are if my sense-data are exactly as they appear? Alternatively, since I don’t know how many matches there are, we could say that there are an ‘indeterminate’ number of matches in my sense-datum. But how can we say there are a number of matches in my sense-datum, but that that number is not 52 or 54 or 49; it is an ‘indeterminate number’? There is no such number as an ‘indeterminate number’!