

# Arguments Against Direct Realism and How to Counter Them

Pierre Le Morvan

Since the demise of the Sense-Datum Theory and Phenomenalism in the last century, Direct Realism in the philosophy of perception has enjoyed a resurgence of popularity.<sup>1</sup> Curiously, however, although there have been attempts in the literature to refute some of the arguments against Direct Realism, there has been, as of yet, no systematic treatment of all eight of the main arguments against it.<sup>2</sup> The aim of this paper is to fill this lacuna in the literature by discussing all eight of these arguments against Direct Realism and the argumentative strategies Direct Realists may deploy to counter them.

Direct Realists hold that perception is an immediate or direct awareness of mind-independent physical objects or events in the external world; in taking this awareness to be immediate or direct, Direct Realists deny that the perception of these physical objects or events requires a prior awareness of some *tertium quid* (e.g., a reified appearance, sense-datum, sensum, idea, quality-instance, species) mediating between the mind and external physical objects or events. Direct Realism is thus logically incompatible with Indirect Realism and with Idealism and Phenomenalism.

Indirect Realists, like Direct Realists, are realists in the sense that they take mind-independent objects or events to be objects of perception; however, unlike Direct Realists, Indirect Realists take this perception to be indirect by involving a prior awareness of some *tertium quid* between the mind and external objects or events.<sup>3</sup>

Idealists and Phenomenalists agree with the Indirect Realists' denial that perception is an immediate or direct awareness of mind-independent physical objects or

events in the external world; but they go further in denying altogether the existence of mind-independent objects or events. For Idealists and Phenomenalists, perception is an awareness of mind-dependent objects or events.<sup>4</sup> Idealists take perceived objects to be ontologically dependent on being perceived (*esse est percipi*). Phenomenalists take perceived objects to be ontologically dependent on the possibility of being perceived (*esse est posse percipi*).<sup>5</sup>

Since Direct Realism is logically incompatible with Indirect Realism or with Idealism and Phenomenalism, defeating Direct Realism is necessary for mounting a case for any of its rivals. This paper's exploration of strategies Direct Realists may deploy against arguments purporting to defeat Direct Realism is thus an exploration of how to defeat these putative defeaters.

In this connection, two preliminary clarifications are in order.

First, Direct Realism is often conflated with what is called "Naïve Realism." Naïve Realism, a strong form of Direct Realism, claims that perceived objects or events always appear exactly as they are. One can be a Direct Realist, however, without being a Naïve Realist. This is because holding that perception of physical objects or events is direct or immediate does not entail that one must also hold that perceived objects or events always appear exactly as they are. Hence, to show that Naïve Realism is untenable does not show that Direct Realism itself is untenable. The importance of drawing this distinction will become clear in the ensuing discussion.

Second, discussions in the philosophy of perception have focused heavily on visual perception. This paper will follow the usual practice of discussing Direct Realism with regard to visual perception, not with regard to other sensory modalities. It's worth

noting, however, that a commitment to Direct Realism with regard to visual perception does not *ipso facto* commit one to Direct Realism concerning any other sensory modality.

So much for preliminaries. In the next section, the eight main arguments against Direct Realism are explored together with the strategies Direct Realists may deploy to counter them.

## **1. The Eight Main Arguments Against Direct Realism**

The eight main arguments against Direct Realism are the Causal Argument, the Time-Lag Argument, the Partial Character of Perception Argument, the Perceptual Relativity Argument, the Argument from Perceptual Illusion, the Argument from Hallucination, the Dubitability Argument, and the Objective Feature Argument. In what follows below, each argument will first be explicated and then subjected to a Direct Realist rebuttal.

### **1.1. The Causal Argument<sup>6</sup>**

*First Premise.* Direct Realists hold that external physical objects or events can be immediate or direct objects of perception.

*Second Premise.* But perception involves a long and complex causal series of events. For instance, light quanta are reflected or emitted from an external object, the light quanta then travel through an intervening medium (*e.g.*, air and/or water), they then hyperpolarize retinal cells by bleaching rhodopsin photopigment molecules, and then a very complex series of physiological processes takes place in the eye and in the brain eventuating in perception.

*Conclusion:* Direct Realism is false. Given this long and complex causal series, physical objects or events cannot be immediate or direct objects of perception.<sup>7</sup>

The proponent of this kind of argument usually then proceeds to claim that something else (a sense-datum, or sensum, or idea, or sensation, or image, or quality-instance, or species) is the immediate object of perception.

### **How Direct Realists May Counter the Causal Argument**

It's wise for Direct Realists to concede that for humans, and for percipients physiologically like us in the actual world, perception involves a long and complex causal series of events, and that perception is indeed dependent upon the condition of the eyes, of the optic nerve, and of the brain, upon the nature of the intervening medium, and so on. One can be a Direct Realist without being so naïve or ignorant as to think that in the actual world (and relevantly similar possible worlds), humans perceive external objects or events directly in the sense that there are no causal intermediaries between the external object or event and the percipient.

Does this concession entail the falsity of Direct Realism? No. In holding that external objects or events are *immediate or direct* objects of perception, Direct Realists deny that perception of these external objects or events must be mediated by a prior awareness of causal intermediaries in the causal series eventuating in perception. Even if, say, the photoisomerisation of rhodopsin photopigment molecules in one's eyes is a nomically necessary intermediary event in one's visual perception of external objects or events, it does not follow, on Direct Realism, that one must be aware of that event (or any

other intermediary event or object) when one perceives external physical objects or events.

In this light, consider the following two claims:

(i) perception is indirect in the sense that it involves a series of causal intermediaries between the external object (or event) and the percipient;

and

(ii) perception is indirect in the sense of involving a prior awareness of something other than the external object (or event).

Claims (i) and (ii) thus distinguished, Direct Realists can argue that it does not follow from the fact that perception is indirect in the sense of (i) that it is indirect in the sense of (ii). What the Causal Argument establishes is only the *causal* indirectness of perception in the sense of (i), not the *cognitive* indirectness in the sense of (ii). Hence, this argument does not refute Direct Realists not committed to denying the indirectness of perception in the sense of (i). Thus, lest they fall prey to this argument, Direct Realists should be careful to distinguish between causal indirectness and cognitive indirectness.

## **1.2. The Time Lag Argument<sup>8</sup>**

*First Premise.* We cannot perceive physical objects or events unless light is reflected or emitted from them to our visual system.

*Second Premise.* Light travels at a finite velocity, and so there is always some time interval between the reflection or emission of light from a physical object or event and the light's reaching our eyes. In the case of nearby objects or events, the time interval may be minute. But in the case of a distant star, the time interval may be so considerable that, by the time the light reaches our eyes, the star may no longer exist.

*Third Premise.* If something no longer exists, we cannot now perceive it, let alone directly perceive it. And so, assuming the distant star no longer exists, we cannot directly perceive it when its light reaches our eyes. But since we are perceiving something, the object of (direct) perception must be something other than the distant star.

*Fourth Premise.* Though time lags are most significant in cases of distant objects such as stars, any time lag, however minute, between physical objects or events and our perception of them is incompatible with Direct Realism, for given the time lag, we cannot directly perceive physical objects and events as they presently are at the time of our perception. Since we perceive something, the object of (direct) perception must be something other than physical objects or events.

*Conclusion:* Direct Realism is false. We do not directly perceive physical objects and events.

The proponent of the argument then usually proposes some other candidate as the object of direct visual awareness (*e.g.*, a sense-datum, or sensum, or sensation, or idea, *etc.*).

### **How Direct Realists May Counter the Time Lag Argument**

Direct Realists should concede the truth of the first two premises, and focus on the third and fourth premises which constitute the crux of the argument. The claim “if something no longer exists, we cannot now perceive it” can be interpreted in at least two distinct ways: (a) if something no longer exists, we cannot now perceive it as it presently is, or (b) if something no longer exists, we cannot now perceive it as it used to be.

When taken in the sense of (a), the claim is obviously true, or so we may suppose. But when taken in the sense of (b), the claim is far from obviously true. For why couldn't we *now* be visually aware of something *as it was* but which no longer exists? Isn't it precisely because there is a time lag that we now see stars (as they used to be) which no longer exist, and that when we see nearby objects, we now see them as they were (perhaps only a few micro-seconds ago)? Direct Realists need not deny the existence of time lags in perception, nor need they be committed to “endowing” human percipients with miraculous perceptual abilities inconsistent with our best physical theories.

In brief, it does not follow from (i) there are time lags in perception, that (ii) we cannot directly perceive external physical objects or events. What does follow from (i) is (iii) that we cannot (given the laws of physics) directly perceive external physical objects or events without a time lag, however minute. And since (iii) is consistent with accepting

Direct Realism, the Time Lag Argument fails to establish (ii), and hence fails to refute Direct Realism.

Though the argument fails to defeat Direct Realism *per se*, three further points are worth noting in this connection.

First, the argument does refute any naïve version of Direct Realism according to which human perception takes place instantaneously.

Second, whatever intuitive pull there may be to the idea that *direct* perception must be *instantaneous* perception must be resisted on pain of refutation by this argument.

Third, in the vast majority of cases of perception (where we are dealing with relatively nearby physical objects or events), perception occurs so quickly that it *seems* to occur instantaneously. This may explain much of the intuitive pull of the idea that we cannot *now* be aware of something (*e.g.*, a distant star) that no longer exists, because in the vast majority of our day-to-day perceptions we deal with relatively nearby objects or events which continue to exist. Hence, it may strike us as odd to think that we can now be aware of something that no longer exists. But when we realize that all perception (at least in the actual world and physically similar possible worlds) involves some time lag (however minute it may be in most cases), and realize the vast extent of the temporal and spatial distances involved in perceiving celestial bodies, the idea that we could now be aware of a celestial body which no longer exists comes to seem less odd.<sup>9</sup> It's important to keep in mind here that Direct Realists need not be committed to the claim that we can *now* be aware of the no-longer existent object as it is *now*, but only that we can *now* be aware of the once-existent object *as it used to be*.



### 1.3. The Partial Character of Perception Argument<sup>10</sup>

*First Premise.* Direct Realists hold that we are able to (directly) perceive physical objects.

*Second Premise.* But to perceive a physical object, we must be able to perceive all of its parts at once.

*Third Premise.* But we are not able to perceive all of a physical object's parts at once. At best, we are able to perceive a spatial part of it (e.g, a portion of its outer surface), but not all of its spatial parts at once.<sup>11</sup>

*Conclusion.* Direct Realism is false. We do not directly perceive physical objects.

The proponent of the argument may then take a further step and infer that “there is no part even of the outer surfaces which I see; for, with respect to any such part, there is, surely, some part of *it* which I do not see. What I see, therefore, cannot be a part of any physical thing.”<sup>12</sup>

#### **How Direct Realists May Counter the Partial Character of Perception Argument**

Direct Realists can point out that this whole argument rests on a very dubious second premise, for there seems to be no good reason to suppose that directly perceiving a physical object entails perceiving all of its (spatial and/or temporal) parts at once. As Chisholm<sup>13</sup> points out, there is no more reason to think that perceiving a physical object

entails perceiving all of its parts at once than to think that eating a dinner entails swallowing all of its parts at once, or visiting London entails visiting all of its parts at once. It is quite true that if we only perceive part of an object, we may not be able to recognize or identify what the object is. For instance, if one saw only the back of someone's head, one might not recognize whose head it was. But it does not follow from (i) one's failure to recognize (or properly identify) whose head it is one sees when one sees its back, that (ii) one does not see the head, unless we falsely suppose that seeing or perception in general entails recognition or identification.<sup>14</sup>

#### **1.4. The Perceptual Relativity Argument<sup>15</sup>**

*First Premise.* A physical object, say a penny, may appear circular (or of a certain size or color) from one angle of view  $V_1$  and appear elliptical (or of another size or color) from another angle of view  $V_2$ .

*Second Premise.* Let us assume that the penny is circular and remains constant in size and color.

*Third Premise.* One is immediately aware of something from  $V_1$ , call it  $O_1$ , and one is immediately aware of something from  $V_2$ , call it  $O_2$ .

*Fourth Premise.*  $O_1$  cannot be identical to  $O_2$ , because  $O_1$  and  $O_2$  have different properties; for instance, one is circular while the other is elliptical, or they differ in size and/or color.

*Fifth Premise.* Even if  $O_1$ , let us say, is qualitatively indistinguishable from the penny, it cannot be numerically identical to the penny. This is because, when one passes from one angle of view to another, there is no sudden change in appearance in what we are perceiving. We would expect such a change in appearance if what we are perceiving at, say, time  $t_1$  was the physical object, and what we are perceiving at, say,  $t_2$  was something other than it.

*Conclusion.* Direct Realism is false. We do not directly perceive physical objects.

The proponent of the argument then usually proceeds to claim that some *tertium quid* (e.g., a sense-datum, idea or the like) is the immediate object of perception.

### **How Direct Realists May Counter the Perceptual Relativity Argument**

The first three premises are unobjectionable. The major problem with the argument occurs in premises four and five. The third premise leaves open whether  $O_1$  is identical to  $O_2$  and whether  $O_1$  is an external physical object identical to  $O_2$ . In the fourth and fifth premises, however, a question-begging reification of appearances takes place. For instance, since the penny is circular (or of a certain size or color), the proponent of the argument assumes that, since something *appears* elliptical (or of another size or color) to us, that of which we are immediately aware *is* elliptical (or of that size or color). The underlying assumption here is that if something *appears* F to subject S, then S must be immediately aware of something that *is* F.

Making this assumption does not beg the question against Naïve Direct Realism which holds that objects always appear as they are, and we may suppose that this argument tells against *that* kind of Direct Realism. But a Direct Realism that does not incorporate this underlying assumption, namely by holding that external physical objects or events may appear other than they are (*e.g.*, a circular object may appear elliptical to us from a certain angle of view), sidesteps this putative defeater altogether.

In brief, by begging the question, this argument fails to defeat Direct Realism, even if it does defeat Naïve Realism.

What's more, there is no need to reify appearances as objects of immediate awareness in order to account for the facts of perceptual relativity. Direct Realists can account for such facts by straightforwardly appealing to various physical and physiological considerations: a round penny may look elliptical (or of another size) from a certain angle because of perspectival distortion; a brown penny of a certain hue may look to be of a different hue from another angle for a whole host of possible reasons (lighting effects, contrast effects, etc.). There is nothing in such commonplace facts which calls for positing the existence of something other than physical objects or events as the objects of immediate awareness.

### **1.5. The Argument from Perceptual Illusion<sup>16</sup>**

*First Premise.* Suppose we are perceiving a straight stick *SS* half submerged in water.

*Second Premise.* In perceiving *SS*, we are immediately aware of something *B* which is bent.

*Third Premise.* *B* cannot be identical to *SS* because *SS* is straight while *B* is bent.

*Conclusion.* Direct Realism is false. We do not directly perceive *SS*; we are aware of *SS* only by means of a prior awareness of *B*.

Proponents of this argument then usually proceed to give an account of the nature of putative objects of awareness such as *B* (*e.g.*, as being sense-data, ideas, or the like).

### **How Direct Realists May Counter the Argument from Perceptual Illusion**

The major flaw of this argument is the same as that of the Perceptual Relativity Argument; to wit, it involves a question-begging assumption that if something *appears* *F* to subject *S*, then *S* is immediately aware of something that *is* *F*, an assumption explicitly rejected by those Direct Realists who hold that object *o* may appear *F* to *S*, even though *o* is not *F*. Moreover, Direct Realists can explain why *SS* may appear bent, without positing objects of awareness which are bent, by appealing to physical considerations: a straight stick submerged in water may look bent because an intervening medium for one part of the stick (water) interacts with light photons differently than an intervening medium for the other part of the stick (air). The straight stick's appearing bent is thus explainable without needing to posit some *tertium quid* which is bent.

## 1.6. The Argument from Hallucination<sup>17</sup>

*First Premise.* Consider the proverbial drunk who “sees” pink rats or Macbeth who “sees” a dagger. Surely, the drunk and Macbeth are each immediately aware of something.

*Second Premise.* But no physical pink rats are present in the case of the drunk, and no physical dagger is present in the case of Macbeth.

*Third Premise.* Since the drunk and Macbeth are each immediately aware of something, that of which they are immediately aware must be something other than an external physical object.

*Fourth Premise.* But there is no, or at least no significant, qualitative or phenomenal difference between the objects of awareness in cases of hallucination and in cases of veridical perception; for instance, the “dagger” appearing to Macbeth may be phenomenally indistinguishable from a real physical dagger should it appear to him.

*Fifth Premise.* Given this phenomenal indistinguishability, we have reason to suppose that, since the objects of immediate awareness in hallucination are not external physical objects, the objects of immediate awareness in veridical perception are also not external physical objects.

*Conclusion.* Direct Realism is false. The objects of immediate awareness in hallucination and in veridical perception are something other than external physical objects (candidates proposed have included ideas, sense-data, and the like).

### **How Direct Realists May Counter the Argument from Hallucination**

The Argument from Hallucination may very well be the most powerful argument against Direct Realism, but it fails to refute it. For consider the following:

First, even if we suppose for the sake of argument that sense-data (or ideas or the like) are the objects of immediate awareness in cases of hallucination, we need not accept that they are *also* the objects of immediate awareness in (veridical) perception. The proponent of the argument employs the principle that if  $x$  and  $y$  are phenomenally indistinguishable,  $x$  and  $y$  are ontologically indistinguishable. But why suppose that phenomenology is such a reliable guide to ontology? For counter-examples to this principle abound. For instance, could not a hologram of a cat appear phenomenally indistinguishable from a real cat? Could not a papier mâché rock appear phenomenally indistinguishable from a real rock? Could not XYZ (of Putnamian fame) appear phenomenally indistinguishable from real water? Similarly, even if we suppose that a dagger-like sense-datum could appear phenomenally indistinguishable from a real dagger, this by itself gives us no compelling reason to suppose that the objects of awareness in hallucination and in (veridical) perception are ontologically of the same category, even if we suppose that sense-data (or ideas or the like) are the objects of awareness in hallucination.

Second, let's suppose that the drunk and Macbeth are each immediately aware of something, and that no physical pink rats appear to the drunk and no physical dagger appears to Macbeth. But from (i) no physical pink rats appear to the drunk or no physical dagger appears to Macbeth, and (ii) the drunk and Macbeth are each immediately aware of something, we need not conclude that (iii) sense-data (or ideas or the like) are the objects of immediate awareness in cases of hallucination. For (iii) neither follows deductively from (i) and (ii), nor is it the only (viable) explanation of (i) and (ii). Direct Realists can account for (i) and (ii) without conjuring up such strange existents as sense-data (or the like) in at least three ways. One account takes states of the brain to be the objects of immediate awareness in cases of hallucination.<sup>18</sup> A second account takes the objects of awareness in cases of hallucination to be mental images.<sup>19</sup> The third account, the one preferred by the author of this paper, takes physical space occupants to be the objects of immediate awareness in hallucination.<sup>20</sup> All three accounts offer explanations of hallucination without conjuring up a whole other order of existents.

In light of the above, we may conclude that the Argument from Hallucination fails to defeat Direct Realism.

### **17. The Dubitability Argument<sup>21</sup>**

*First Premise.* When one perceives a physical object, there is much that one can doubt. For instance, when one sees a tomato, one can doubt whether it is a tomato or a cleverly painted piece of wax, whether it is a reflection or a hologram, or whether one is suffering a hallucination.



*Second Premise.* But one cannot doubt that some sensible existent (*e.g.*, a red patch of a round and bulgy shape) is directly present to one's consciousness.

*Third Premise.* If something is indubitably present to one's consciousness, it cannot be identical to anything that is not indubitably present to one's consciousness.

*Conclusion.* Direct Realism is false. What is directly present to one's consciousness in perception, namely, some sensible existent, is not identical to any physical object or event.<sup>22</sup>

### **How Direct Realists May Counter the Dubitability Argument**

Since the first premise of the argument is true, it should be conceded. The second may be challenged, for one can raise plenty of doubts concerning whether a sensible existent which is (say) actually red and bulgy-shaped is directly present to one's consciousness. To give but one example, one can raise plenty of doubts as to whether anything actually is colored.<sup>23</sup> But the most glaring weakness of the argument occurs in the third premise where Leibniz's Law is fallaciously applied in an intensional context, namely that of doubting. It is quite possible for a person *S* to doubt that *x* is directly present to *S*'s consciousness and not doubt that *y* is directly present to *S*'s consciousness, even though *x* is identical to *y*. Consider the following analogies: Sally might doubt that her ring is made of the element with atomic number 79 and might not doubt that her ring is made of gold, even though gold is identical to the element with atomic number 79. Given its fallacious use of Leibniz's Law in an intensional context, the argument is unsound.

It's worth noting in this connection that proponents of arguments of this type (e.g., Price) have invariably (as far as the author of this paper is aware) been strong foundationalists out to secure indubitable foundations for the structure of belief. One of the reasons they may have found arguments of this type persuasive is their underlying conviction that indubitable foundations could be had.<sup>24</sup>

### **1.8. The Objective Feature Argument**

What we may call "The Objective Feature Argument" encapsulates the case in Perkins (1983) against Direct Realism. In what follows, the argument will first be summarized, an explanation of his premises will then be provided, and finally it will be shown how Direct Realists may counter the argument.

#### ***The Argument Summarized***

*First Premise.* If Direct Realism is true, we can be directly (visually) aware of at least one objective feature of physical objects or events.<sup>25</sup>

*Second Premise.* There is no objective feature of physical objects or events we can be directly (visually) aware of.<sup>26</sup>

*Conclusion:* Direct Realism is false.

### *Explication of the Premises*

Underpinning his entire case against Direct Realism, and also his case for Indirect Realism, for all sensory modalities including vision, is Perkins's assumption that we can only be aware of physical objects or events by means of a prior awareness of sensible qualities: "sensory awareness of objects and events can be accomplished only through sensory awareness of sensible qualities."<sup>27</sup> On the basis of this assumption, Perkins then proceeds to consider whether sensible qualities, of which he thinks we can be directly aware, are objective features of physical objects or events.

He challenges the Direct Realist to choose a visible feature, one that is an objective feature of physical objects or events, of which we can be directly visually aware. He claims that, in making this choice, the direct realist will want to steer away from three dangers.

The first danger to avoid is choosing a feature that can turn out to be a disposition to *look* so and so, for choosing such a feature is liable to lead to Indirect Realism; instead, the Direct Realist will "look for a feature whose nature would be what it is were no seeing creatures so much as a possibility."<sup>28</sup>

Also dangerous for the Direct Realist, thinks Perkins, "is the choice of a feature whose nature cannot show itself to vision."<sup>29</sup> He adds: "The direct realist will not begin by speaking of the atomic structures of visible surfaces as a feature we directly see."<sup>30</sup>

Finally, the Direct Realist "wants the feature to be one we needn't visually infer from other perceived data – for the latter will be more directly perceived than the inferred feature."<sup>31</sup>

Trying to avoid all three dangers, the feature the Direct Realist will opt for, thinks Perkins, is the shape of the facing surface of an object, because (a) the definition of its nature requires no reference to how the surface looks to us, (b) to vision “a shape reveals itself for what it is,” and (c) “shape need not be inferred from another feature of the shaped object or of any object before the eyes.”<sup>32</sup>

At this point, Perkins objects on these lines:

I cannot *see* the shape of any object except through seeing colors, I cannot become visually conscious of the shape of an object except through becoming visually conscious of a pattern of color. We see the shapes of objects by seeing boundaries. And we see boundaries by seeing demarcations between expanses of different color. Our seeing the difference in color between one region and another enables us to see a boundary and our seeing shapes consists in our seeing boundaries. Becoming visually conscious of shapes always in part consists, therefore, in becoming visually conscious of colors.<sup>33</sup>

Since we cannot, according to Perkins, directly see the shapes of objects because we see shapes by seeing colors, the Direct Realist must propose that we directly see colors of objects, and that these colors are objective features of these objects.<sup>34</sup> Perkins then proceeds to argue at length that colors are not objective features of physical objects, and thus concludes that Direct Realism cannot be true of vision.<sup>35</sup>

### **How Direct Realists May Counter the Objective Feature Argument**

In assessing Perkins's case against Direct Realism, his underlying assumptions deserve careful scrutiny.

One of his most fundamental assumptions, which goes unargued for and yet is crucial to his case against Direct Realism, is his sensory atomism (one reminiscent of Locke's): as a sensory atomist, Perkins takes quality-instances to be direct objects of sensory awareness. The only way he envisages physical objects or events as being objects of sensory awareness is if these quality-instances are objective features of these physical objects or events. Despite acknowledging that, with his strategy for arguing against Direct Realism, "everything hinges on the nature of the property chosen as a candidate of direct sensory awareness,"<sup>36</sup> Perkins fails to realize that by reifying quality-instances (he uses the term 'quality-instance' interchangeably with the terms 'property', 'feature', and 'sensory quality') as objects of direct sensory awareness, not only does he mischaracterize Direct Realism, but he subtly begs the question against it. Consider the following.

Direct Realists need not hold that quality-instances are direct *objects* of sensory awareness at least some of which are also objective features of physical objects or events; instead, they take the objects of (veridical) perception to be physical objects or events themselves, which, to humans at least, appear colored. Direct Realists do not have to assume that quality-instances are the direct objects of sensory awareness, and attribute at least some of these quality-instances to physical objects or events as their objective features. Rather, they can take sensible qualities to be *modes* by which objects of direct sensory awareness (namely, physical objects or events) appear to subjects.<sup>37</sup> By saddling

Direct Realists with a commitment to quality-instances as *objects* rather than as *modes* of direct sensory awareness, Perkins fundamentally mischaracterizes what Direct Realists need be committed to.

What's more, Perkins's reification of quality-instances as objects of direct sensory awareness subtly begs the question against Direct Realists. If one begins by assuming that quality-instances are *objects* of direct sensory awareness, one is then led to think of them as being a kind of *tertium quid* by means of a prior awareness of which the percipient is (at best) indirectly aware of external physical objects or events. Since Direct Realists may explicitly reject the reification of quality-instances as *objects* of direct sensory awareness, Perkins must do more than take for granted this reification. By taking it for granted, he merely assumes an absolutely crucial point he needed to prove in order to refute Direct Realism. Hence, his argument fails to defeat Direct Realism.<sup>38</sup>

## **2. Conclusion**

In closing, we would do well to (1) summarize the lessons that may be derived from our discussion of the eight main arguments against Direct Realism, and (2) comment on the broader philosophical significance of the failure of these arguments to defeat Direct Realism.

### **2.1 Lessons**

Lest their position fall prey to these arguments, Direct Realists should:

(i) distinguish causal indirectness from cognitive indirectness and maintain that the causal indirectness of perception does not entail that it is cognitively indirect;

(ii) concede that we cannot (given the laws of physics) directly perceive external physical objects or events without a time lag, however minute, without conceding that this entails that we cannot directly perceive physical objects;

(iii) reject the notion that perceiving a physical object requires perceiving all of its spatial or temporal parts at once;

(iv) maintain that physical objects can appear differently than how they are;

(v) be wary of question-begging reifications of appearances by their opponents;

(vi) concede that doubts can be raised that we are perceiving physical objects without conceding that this entails that we do not perceive physical objects;

(vii) treat sensible qualities as *modes* of perceptual awareness rather than as *objects* of awareness.

## 2.2. The Significance of Defeating the Putative Defeaters of Direct Realism

Though this paper has not been historical in focus, the philosophical significance of defeating the putative defeaters of Direct Realism may be better appreciated by understanding what is at stake in historical context. Accordingly, this paper will close with some conspactive remarks about this context.

Peter Coffey (1917), in a wonderful, yet now little read, discussion of the history of epistemology, tells us of a debate in scholastic philosophy between the *Perceptionists* and the *Representationists*. The Perceptionists, whom today we would call “Direct Realists,” maintained that in perception the subject is directly aware or cognizant, not of species (or images or representations or quality-instances) putatively serving as perceptual intermediaries between the mind and mind-independent external objects, but

of these external objects themselves. They held that, even if the species (or image or representation or quality-instance) is the *medium quo* (the means by which) an external object is perceived, the *objectum quod percipitur* (that which is perceived) is not the species, but rather the external object itself. By contrast, the scholastic Representationists held that (strictly speaking) the *objectum quod percipitur* is the species itself.

Though Descartes ridiculed the species (among other things) of the scholastic Representationists, he espoused a doctrine of perceptual experience very much akin to theirs, where (cartesian) ideas replaced (scholastic) species in the roles of (i) perceptual intermediaries between the mind and external objects, and as (ii) representations of external objects. A key negative tenet of scholastic Representationism, namely that perceptual experience does *not* consist in a direct or immediate intuition or presentation of external objects, and a key positive tenet of scholastic Representationism, namely that *appearances* are the immediate objects of perceptual experience, were adopted by Descartes and subsequently became two of the most deeply entrenched tenets of Modern Philosophy, tenets espoused in variant ways by (among others) the Rationalists, the Empiricists, Kant,<sup>39</sup> the Absolute Idealists, and a whole host of twentieth century thinkers espousing positions including (but not limited to) various versions of the Sense-Datum Theory and Phenomenalism.<sup>40</sup>

If the reasoning of this paper is sound, the eight main arguments against Direct Realism fail to defeat it. Hence, insofar as Indirect Realism, Idealism, Phenomenalism, and even External-World Skepticism are motivated, whether implicitly or explicitly, by the presumed untenability of Direct Realism, the defeat of these putative defeaters undercuts an important motivation for each of these views. Worth noting as well is that



the contemporary resurgence of Direct Realism represents, in an important sense, a return to, and vindication of, tenets espoused by the scholastic Perceptionists centuries ago.<sup>41</sup>

*The College of New Jersey, Ewing, NJ, USA*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alston, William P. (1999). "Back to the Theory of Appearing," *Philosophical Perspectives* 13, pp. 181-203.
- (1998). "Perception and Conception", in *Pragmatism, Reasons and Norms: A Realistic Assessment*, edited by K.R. Westphal, New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 59-87.
- (1990). "Externalist Theories of Perception," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50, pp. 73-97.
- Austin, J.L. (1962) *Sense and Sensibilia*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Barnes, W.F.H. (1945) "The Myth of Sense-Data," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 45: 89-118.
- Berkeley, George (1969) *Philosophical Writings* (edited and selected by T.E. Jessop), New York: Greenwood Press.
- Broad, C.D. (1923). *Scientific Thought*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- (1925). *The Mind and its Place in Nature*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Chisholm, R.M. (1957). *Perceiving*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- (1976). *Person and Object*, New York: Open Court.

- Coffey, Peter (1917). *Epistemology*, New York: Longmans & Green.
- Collins, Arthur (1999). *Possible Experience: Understanding Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Descartes, René (1964). *Oeuvres*, Paris: J. Gilbert.
- Dretske, Fred (1990). "Seeing, Believing and Knowing", in *Visual Cognition and Action*, edited by D. Osherson, M. Kosslyn and J. Hollerbach, Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, pp. 129-148.
- Gram, Moltke S. (1983). *Direct Realism*, Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Harrison, Jonathan (1993). "Science, Souls and Sense-Data" in *New Representationalisms*, edited by E. Wright, London: Avebury, pp. 15-45.
- Hardin, C.L. (1988). *Color for Philosophers*, Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Hicks, George Dawes (1938). *Critical Realism*, London: Macmillan.
- Johnston, Mark "The Strange Object of Hallucination," unpublished manuscript.
- Kelley, David (1986). *The Evidence of the Senses*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press.
- Landesman, Charles (1989). *Color and Consciousness: An Essay in Metaphysics*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Langsam, Harold (1997). "The Theory of Appearing Defended," *Philosophical Studies* 87, pp. 33-59.
- Le Morvan, Pierre (2000). *A Defense of the Theory of Appearing*, Syracuse University Doctoral Dissertation.
- Lewis, C.I. (1929). *Mind and the World Order*, New York: Scribner & Sons.
- Locke, John (1967). *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Lovejoy, Arthur (1930). *The Revolt Against Dualism: An Inquiry Concerning the Existence of Ideas*, New York: Transaction Publications.
- Maclachlan, D.L.C. (1989). *Philosophy of Perception*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Mill, John Stuart (1950). *The Philosophy of Scientific Method*. New York: Hafner Publishing.
- Moore, G.E. (1922). "Some Judgments of Perception" in his *Philosophical Studies*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- (1953). *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, London: Allen & Unwin.
- Perkins, Moreland (1983). *Sensing the World*, Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Prichard, H.A. (1909). *Kant's Theory of Knowledge*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Price, H.H. (1932). *Perception*, London: Methuen.
- Putnam, Hillary (1994). "Dewey Lectures," *The Journal of Philosophy* 91, pp. 131-193.
- Reid, Thomas (1969), *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Russell, Bertrand (1989). *The Problems of Philosophy*, Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Searle, John (1982). *Intentionality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For instance, see Alston (1999, 1998, 1990), Langsam (1997), Gram (1983), Kelley (1986), Putnam (1994), and Austin (1962). Searle (1982) offers an account of perceptual experience that is direct realist at least in part.

<sup>2</sup> The works mentioned in the previous note reject some of the arguments against Direct Realism but none addresses all eight of them.

<sup>3</sup> We may take Descartes and Locke as paradigmatic examples of Indirect Realists.

<sup>4</sup> We may take Berkeley and the Absolute Idealists as paradigmatic proponents of this position.

<sup>5</sup> What is meant here is Ontological Phenomenalism, not just Linguistic Phenomenalism. J.S.Mill is a paradigmatic example of an Ontological Phenomenalist.

<sup>6</sup> Versions of this argument can be found in Maclachlan (1989), pp. 46-47; Harrison (1993), pp. 18-19; Landesman (1993), pp. 14-15; Lovejoy (1930), pp. 20-23; and Price (1932), pp. 30-31, *inter alia*.

<sup>7</sup> To quote part of a memorable phrase of Dewey's, "it is pure fiction that a 'sensation' or peripheral excitation, or stimulus, travels undisturbed in solitary state in its own coach-and-four to either the brain or consciousness in its purity." Quoted in Lovejoy (1930), p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Versions of this argument may be found in Maclachlan (1989), pp. 33-48; Broad (1923), pp. 367f; Lovejoy (1930), pp. 18f, *inter alia*.

<sup>9</sup> If perception can occur across spatial and temporal distances in the case of nearby objects and events, why could it not occur over spatial and temporal distances in the case of far-away objects or events?

<sup>10</sup> Variations of this argument may be found in Descartes's Second Meditation, in Broad (1925) pp. 149-150; and in Moore (1953), p. 34, *inter alia*.

<sup>11</sup> A variation of this argument claims that we are able to perceive, at best, a temporal part of a physical object, but not all of its temporal parts.

<sup>12</sup> Chisholm (1957), p. 154.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> For reasons why perception does not entail identification or recognition, see Alston (1998). Perceiving an object does not entail recognizing it or identifying it, for it is possible to perceive an object without being able to recognize or identify it. For instance, to use an example from Dretske (1990), it's possible to see a black cat on a sofa and mistake it for a sweater. But in mistaking it for a sweater, one is still seeing a cat on a sofa.

<sup>15</sup> Versions of this argument may be found in Harrison (1993), pp. 18-19; Maclachlan (1989), pp. 42-43; Broad (1925), 211f; Russell (1989), pp. 21-22; and Price (1932), pp. 38-39; *inter alia*.

<sup>16</sup> Versions of this argument may be found in Harrison (1993), pp. 18-19; Maclachlan (1989), pp. 36-39; and Price (1932), p. 28; *inter alia*.

<sup>17</sup> Versions of this argument may be found in Russell (1989), pp. 19-20; Price (1932), pp. 28-33; Harrison (1993), pp. 18-19; and Maclachlan (1989), pp. 36-38, *inter alia*.

<sup>18</sup> See Mark Johnston's "The Strange Object of Hallucination" (unpublished manuscript).

<sup>19</sup> See Alston (1999).

<sup>20</sup> On this account, hallucinations are categorized as extreme illusions, where extreme illusions are cases where physical space occupants (*e.g.*, air) appear to the percipient radically other than how they are (*e.g.*, as falsidically appearing to have properties they do not have). For a discussion of this, see Le Morvan (2000).

<sup>21</sup> This version of the argument is from Price (1932), pp. 3f; *cf.* Russell (1912), pp. 23f and Descartes's Second Meditation.

<sup>22</sup> Price then proceeds to identify the sensible existent as a sense-datum, and later gives an indirect realist account of physical object perception.

<sup>23</sup> See Hardin (1988) for why he thinks nothing is colored.

<sup>24</sup> Rejecting this argument, though, does not entail rejecting more moderate versions of foundationalism.

<sup>25</sup> Perkins (1983), 227-229.

<sup>26</sup> Perkins (1983), 229-239.

<sup>27</sup> Perkins (1983), p. 21; *cf.* pp. 3, 13, 15, 20, 22, 25-26, 57-58, 97f, 183f.

<sup>28</sup> Perkins (1983), p. 227.

<sup>29</sup> Perkins (1983), p. 227.

<sup>30</sup> Perkins (1983), p. 227.

<sup>31</sup> Perkins (1983), p. 227.

<sup>32</sup> Perkins (1983), p. 228.

<sup>33</sup> Perkins (1983), p. 228.

<sup>34</sup> Perkins (1983), p. 228-229.

<sup>35</sup> Perkins (1983), p. 229-239.

<sup>36</sup> Perkins (1983), p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> See the discussion of modes of awareness in Coffey (1917) and Kelley (1986).

<sup>38</sup> An anonymous referee of this journal asked, appropriately, why the space allotted in this paper to the explanation and refutation of the eighth argument is comparatively greater than that allotted to the other seven, and whether this suggests “that the issues at stake in that exchange reframe or cast new light on those raised by the previous seven.” Though this suggestion may be correct, the principal reason that more space was allotted to the eighth argument is that it proved less amenable to a succinct encapsulation and refutation than the previous seven. The greater space allotted to this argument is not meant to suggest it is of greater philosophical importance than the previous seven.

<sup>39</sup> What we might call the “standard interpretation” of Kant has traditionally taken him as reifying appearances as the immediate objects of sensory awareness. For an interesting recent challenge to this interpretation, see Collins (1999).

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Reid (1969) is a notable exception in the early modern period. Prichard (1909), Coffey (1917), Hicks (1938), and Barnes (1945) swam against the prevailing current by defending Direct Realism in the first half of the twentieth century.

<sup>41</sup> Thanks to Katherine Jackson, William P. Alston, C.L. Hardin, and to an anonymous referee of this journal for helpful comments and suggestions.