

PHL340 Handout 4: Direct Realism

§1 Direct Realism

Recall that representationalists explain phenomenal character in terms of an experience's representational content. So perceptual experience puts us in perceptual contact with ordinary objects and their properties in virtue of *representing* these entities.

Direct realism is the main contemporary alternative to representationalism. The view goes by many names: direct realism, naïve realism (MGF Martin), the object view (Brewer), and the relational view (Campbell; Soteriou).

Confusingly, many others use 'direct realism' to instead pick out any view that treats ordinary objects and their properties as direct objects of perceptual awareness (and so classify some varieties of representationalism as direct realism).

Unlike representationalism, direct realism initially restricts itself to the phenomenal character of veridical perceptual experience. As a result, many internal disputes between direct realists concern how to extend the account to cover illusory and hallucinatory experience.

Campbell states the view as follows:

'On a Relational View, the phenomenal character of your experience, as you look around the room, is constituted by the actual layout of the room itself: which particular objects are there, their intrinsic properties, such as colour and shape, and how they are arranged in relation to one another and to you. On this Relational View, two ordinary observers standing in roughly the same place, looking at the same scene, are bound to have experience with the same phenomenal character. For the phenomenal character of the experiences is constituted by the layout and characteristics of the very same external objects.' (Campbell 2002, p. 116)

He arrives at a clearer formulation in a recent book:

'To be having a perceptual experience is, characteristically, to be experiencing a particular scene from a particular point of view; characterizing the qualitative character of the experience involves characterizing the objects and properties in the scene observed... the qualitative character of your experience is constituted by the point of view from which you are observing the scene, any relevant adverbial modification of the relation of experience, and the relevant qualitative aspects of the external scene.' (Campbell 2014, p. 28)

Brewer provides a somewhat different formulation:

'...perception consists most fundamentally in a relation of conscious acquaintance with mind independent physical objects themselves, from a given spatio-temporal point of view, in a particular sense modality, and in specific circumstances of perception.' (Brewer 2011, p. 101)

Abstracting from small differences between these formulations:

Direct Realism (a.k.a. the Object View, etc.): the phenomenal character of a veridical perceptual experience consists in the external world objects and properties the experience presents, together with the perceiving subject's perspective on these objects and properties.

An example will help. Suppose you see a black cat sitting on your porch. Direct realism says that phenomenal character of your visual experience of the cat consists in (a) the cat itself, (b) its visible properties (e.g. its black colour, its sleek shape, etc.), and (c) the various elements of your perceptual perspective on the cat (e.g. your location, where you've directed your perceptual attention, the lighting conditions, how your eyes are functioning, etc.).

Note: If any element from (a)-(c) were to change, the phenomenal character of your experience would also change. For instance, you might see a different black cat, or the same cat with different visible properties. Or you might change your perspective on the cat by walking around to view it from another angle, or shift your attention from its ears to its tail.

More generally, direct realism entails that two perceptual experiences have the same phenomenal character only if both (1) the subjects perceive the exact same objects and properties, and (2) the relevant perspectival factors are identical.

From a metaphysical point of view, direct realists characterize perceptual experience as a three-place *relation* between an observer, a perceptual perspective, and the elements of an external scene (i.e. objects and their properties). By contrast, representationalists treat perceptual experiences as mental *states* with a conscious representational content.

§2 Illusion and Hallucination

Representationalism had a nice and intuitive explanation of the distinction between veridical, illusory, and hallucinatory perceptual experience:

- A. A *veridical* experience represents the object with which you are in perceptual contact as having properties it in fact has.
- B. An *illusory* experience represents the object with which you are in perceptual contact as having properties it in fact lacks.
- C. A *hallucinatory* experience as of an F thing represents that there is an F object before you, but in fact you are not in perceptual contact with any object.

There are hard questions about precisely how the direct realist ought to explain this distinction. Illusion poses less of an obvious puzzle than hallucination. Direct realists explain the contrast between illusory and veridical perceptual experience by appeal to the perspectival factors that help constitute phenomenal character.

One way to think about the veridical/non-veridical distinction on direct realism would be to consider how telescopes operate. When you first peer through a telescope to see Mars, for example, the planet likely shows up somewhat fuzzily. To see the Mars clearly, you must focus the telescope to bring the planet's features into view. Similarly, direct realists talk of perceptual experience as being in and out of focus. When in focus, perceptual experience reveals objects and their observable properties. When out of focus, an experience offers at best a confused presentation of these objects and their properties.

A standard direct realist account of illusory and hallucinatory experience relies upon the relevant perspectival factors to help explain the phenomenal characters of these experiences.

In cases of *illusory experience*, the perspectival factors are such that an object that is F nevertheless seems, from the subject's point of view, to be G.

Notice: The instance of F instantiated by the object still helps constitute the phenomenal character of the experience, even though this phenomenal character leads subjects to believe that they see a G object (rather than the actual F object). So the 'worldly' elements combined by the three-place perceptual relation remain the same between veridical and illusory experiences: ordinary objects and their actual observable properties.

Hallucinatory experiences pose a deeper problem for direct realism. Unlike in the illusory case, subjects have no perceptual contact with an external world object, and so cannot explain hallucinatory experience as a kind of unfocused awareness of the object. Indeed, how direct realists ought to explain the phenomenal character of these experiences remains a wide-open (and hotly debated) question within contemporary philosophy of perception.

A somewhat schematic answer in line with the earlier account of illusory experience would be to say that in hallucinatory perceptual experiences the perspectival factors exert a strong enough influence on the phenomenal character so as to make it seem to a subject as though her experience presents an external world object.

Note: To turn this schematic answer into something substantive we would need a better idea of how perspectival factors could alone construct this object-like phenomenal character despite the absence of perceptual contact with an object or its properties.

Direct realism entails a kind of modesty about our knowledge of the phenomenal character of perceptual experience:

1. Direct realism individuates phenomenal characters in terms of the objects, properties, and perspectival factors that a perceptual experience relates.
2. Yet the view also explains the distinction between veridical, illusory, and hallucinatory experience in terms of differences in what the perceptual relation relates (i.e. objects, properties, and perspectival factors).
3. Yet these differences are not in general detectable from a subject's point of view.
4. So introspectively indistinguishable veridical, illusory, and hallucinatory experiences do not share their phenomenal character (those that endorse this claim are often called *disjunctivists*).
5. We therefore cannot rely upon introspection alone as a reliable guide to phenomenal character.

Note: direct realists are therefore *externalists* about the phenomenal character of perceptual experience

The modesty that direct realists force upon introspection sharply separates direct realism from the other views we've examined. Most indirect realists and representationalists assume that introspection provides a reliable guide to the phenomenal character of perceptual experience. Indeed, their reliance upon introspection partly drives their respective accounts of illusory and hallucinatory experience. Unlike the direct realists, indirect realists and (most) representationalists believe that illusory and hallucinatory experiences can share their phenomenal character with veridical experiences.

§3 Direct Realism vs. Representationalism

§3.1 Role of Representational Content

Despite what many representationalists (and indeed, some direct realists) believe, direct realists need not deny that perceptual experiences possess representational content. What they deny is the representationalist claim that we must explain the phenomenal character of perceptual experience in terms of this representational content.

Hard Question: what explanatory work could representational content perform such that direct realists would accept perceptual representational content?

§3.2 Role of Perceptual Processing

When first confronted with direct realism, many philosophers react with something like the following rough line of thought:

1. Perceptual processing constructs and manipulates representations that encode information delivered by our sensory organs.
2. Direct realists explain perceptual experience in terms of a relation between an observer, a perceptual perspective, and elements of an external scene.
3. But we cannot square the existence of this sort of perceptual relation with our best account of perceptual processing (as given at 1).
4. So direct realism isn't consistent with our best empirical account of how perception works, and that is a bad result.

Campbell discusses this line of thought on pp. 118-120. Here is what he offers in response:

Suppose we have a medium which, like glass, can be transparent. But suppose that, unlike glass, it is highly volatile, and needs constant adjustment and recalibration if it is to remain transparent in different contexts... The upshot of the adjustment in each case is not the construction of a representation on the medium of the scene being viewed; the upshot of the adjustment is simply that the medium becomes transparent. You might think of visual processing as a bit like that. It is not that the brain is constructing a conscious inner representation whose intrinsic character is independent of the environment. It is, rather, that there is a kind of complex adjustment that the brain has to undergo, in each context, in order that you can be visually related to the things around you; so that you can see them, in other words. [Campbell 2002, p. 119]

He takes the role of perceptual processing to be one of achieving the kind of 'focus' required for a perceptual experience to count as veridical. Nothing in the standard empirical story precludes him from taking this line about the goal of perceptual processing. In contrast, a representationalist will say that the aim of the perceptual processing is to construct a

conscious representation of the external world that accurately depicts how things stand in the perceived scene.

§4 Arguments for Direct Realism

§4.1 *Transparency* (M.G.F. Martin and Brewer)

You'll find something like the following argument in Brewer. Similar arguments feature prominently in the work of M.G.F. Martin.

1. Introspective reflection suggests that perceptual experience involves direct presentation of mind-independent ordinary objects and their perceptible properties (note: this is a combination of *Transparency* and *Objectivity*)
2. Direct realism accommodates both the 'presentational' aspect of perceptual phenomenology and the 'objectual' aspect, since it treats perceptual experience as a relation to (among other things) mind-independent ordinary objects.
3. Representationalists that restrict representational content to properties cannot accommodate the 'objectual' aspect.
4. But even those that accommodate this aspect (e.g. by allowing that perceptual experience also represents ordinary objects) fail to accommodate the 'presentational' aspect of perceptual phenomenology.
5. No other alternative to direct realism better accommodates perceptual phenomenology than representationalism.
6. So either we must be error theorists about perceptual phenomenology, or we ought to be direct realists.

Questions: this argument relies on some fairly fine-grained claims about the phenomenal character of perceptual experience. Is your introspective access similarly fine-grained? And how could we settle disputes about these kinds of phenomenological claims?

Notice: the kind of error theory that a representationalist would have to offer, if she were to pursue the first option in 6, would have much less to explain away than the error theories required by sense datum theorists and adverbialists.

§4.2 *Perceptual Experience Must Provide the Basic Subject Matter of Thought* (Campbell)

A centerpiece of Campbell's book *Reference and Consciousness* is a version of the following argument for direct realism.

1. Perceptual experience plays a central role in enabling us to think about external world objects and their properties.
2. A right account of perceptual experience must explain how perceptual experience is able to fulfill this explanatory role.
3. Only direct realism can explain how perceptual experience can fulfill this explanatory role (in particular how perceptual experience can enable us to think perceptual demonstrative thoughts – those we form in response to perceptual experience and usually express with sentences such as 'that is red' or 'that is square').
4. So direct realism is the right account of perceptual experience.

Many accept 1 and 2. Campbell deploys various arguments in defence of 3.

§4.3 Looking Ahead: *Berkeley's Puzzle*

In a few weeks we'll read Campbell's paper 'Berkeley's Puzzle'. In that paper he provides the following argument:

1. Perceptual experience provides the basis for an entitlement to treat ordinary objects as mind-independent.
2. A right account of perceptual experience must explain how it can provide a basis for this entitlement.
3. Only direct realism can discharge the explanatory demand imposed by 2
4. So direct realism is true.

1 and 2 form the basis of *Berkeley's Puzzle* (so named after George Berkeley, a famous 18th Century Anglo-Irish philosopher).

§5 Objections to Direct Realism

§5.1 Challenge from the Explanatory Role of Perceptual Content

1. Our best accounts of rational belief formation hold that it would be rational for a subject to form a belief only if the content of her belief would bear a suitable relation to contents of those speech acts or mental states in response to which she formed the belief (e.g. a subject's prior beliefs, or what someone else has said).
2. It is often rational to form beliefs in response to perceptual experience (e.g. to believe that something is round in response to seeing a round object).
3. Direct realism does not afford representational content a fundamental role in perceptual experience.
4. So direct realists face a challenge: either accommodate a larger role for representational content (and risk falling back into representationalism), or construct an alternative account of why it is rational to form certain beliefs in response to perceptual experience.

See §6.2 for Brewer's attempt to answer this challenge. You also get a partial glimpse of Campbell's response in §5 of his chapter.

§5.2 Objection From Explanatory Symmetry

Last time we saw an argument for representationalism from the explanatory work done by perceptual experience. The argument relied upon alleged explanatory symmetries between introspectively indistinguishable veridical, illusory, and hallucinatory experiences.

Others use these alleged symmetries to argue against direct realism (cf. Pautz 2010):

1. E_V and E_I (or E_H) successfully perform some of the same explanatory roles.
Candidate Roles: the experiences (a) *justify* the same beliefs about the external world; (b) provide the same *reasons* for action. And (c) any perceptual experience as of an F object *enables a subject to think about F* (e.g. an experience as of a red thing enables a subject to think about the colour red).
2. Direct realism cannot explain these explanatory symmetries between E_V , E_I , and E_H (or at least it cannot explain these symmetries nearly as well as its competitors).
3. So we ought to abandon direct realism [from 1 and 2]

Question: do you find this version of the argument more convincing than the version defending representationalism? See pp. 112-113 of Brewer for discussion of (c), and Ch. 6 for discussion of (a) and (b).