

Against Direct Realism

Paul Griffiths argues that modern metaphysics has taken a wrong turn.

The late twentieth century saw a dramatic rise in the fortunes of direct realism. Up until the middle years of that century, the vast majority of philosophers dismissed theories of direct perception of the world – essentially the common sense understanding – as naïve, but by its close, such theories had become the orthodoxy within analytic philosophy. William Fish, who has written extensively on the philosophy of perception, puts it particularly well: “There was a time when to call a theory of perception a version of ‘direct realism’ was almost equivalent to calling it ‘hopelessly naïve’.” Time has told however, that it was this assumption which was naïve, and nowadays the majority of theories on the market see themselves as direct realist” (*Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 82 (3), 2004). On the other hand, mainstream cognitive science has been consistent in its rejection of theories of direct perception such as direct realism.

So what is ‘direct realism’? And why does it matter?

‘Direct realism’ (also known as ‘common sense realism’ or ‘naïve realism’) is the idea that *our senses provide us with direct awareness of objects as they really are*. The ‘directness’ part of the claim captures well our common sense intuitions of direct perceptual access to the world. However, as the term suggests, ‘direct realism’ also makes the ‘realism’ claim, which is that *the existence of the world of objects is not dependent upon it being perceived*. Realism says that objects exist independently of us – objectively, as it were. The realism claim unites both direct and indirect realism against idealism, whereas those two realisms divide over the directness claim.

But why should we be concerned about a debate between theories of perception? Alva Noë and Evan Thompson put it well at the turn of this century while introducing a collection of papers on the philosophy and science of perception: what is at stake is one’s understanding of consciousness itself and one’s place in the natural world. The stakes could not be higher.

The Twentieth Century Rehabilitation Of Direct Realism

Until the 1950s, students would have been disabused of the common sense, direct realist understanding of perception in Philosophy 101. Bertrand Russell does the job in the first few pages of his 1912 bestseller *The Problems of Philosophy*, for example. But John Searle now talks of the ‘embarrassing fact’ that if you look at the history of philosophy from Descartes onwards, there were no direct realists among the great philosophers.

So what happened?

Two arguments against direct realism held sway up until the early years of the twentieth century. The argument from illusion draws on illusory and hallucinatory cases in which our senses evidently do not provide us with direct awareness of objects as they really are; and the argument from science draws on our understanding of the perceptual process in terms of a complex causal chain involving, in the case of vision, light rays, retinas, optic nerves, and brains.

For a period in the middle of the last century there was relatively little interest in the philosophy of perception. However, when philosophers returned to the topic, the alternatives to direct realism (indirect realism and idealism) were at odds with the new intellectual climate, particularly with its commitment to physicalism, but which was also influenced by the vestiges of linguistic philosophy, which gave a newfound philosophical authority to common sense. Thus motivated, the longstanding arguments against direct realism came under renewed scrutiny.

Two types of objection were raised against the argument from illusion: ‘disjunctivism’ and ‘representationalism’. Disjunctivism accepts that in the case of illusions and hallucinations our senses do not provide us with direct awareness of objects as they really are, but rejects the generalisation of this conclusion to standard (so called ‘veridical’) cases of perception. Representationalism rejects the argument from illusion outright, on the grounds that it rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of perception. These objections draw on controversial principles, and a sometimes strident debate continues between the two factions within the direct realist camp. Nevertheless, although there are a few dissenters, direct realism, in one form or the other is now the orthodoxy within contemporary analytic philosophy.

The Debate Within Cognitive Science

Whilst the philosophy of perception changed course in the middle of the last century, mainstream cognitive science has remained true to its roots in the ideas of Herman von Helmholtz, (1821-94). It follows him in a rejection of the notion of direct perception of the world as being incompatible with a scientific understanding of the perceptual process. As Alva Noë puts it in the 2002 *MacMillan Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science*, on this understanding, when you see a tomato you do not make *direct* contact with it. At best the contact you make with the tomato is mediated by a complicated physical causal process: the tomato reflects red (short wavelength) light, which gives rise to patterns of stimulation of receptor cells on your retinas, which in turn produces activity in the optic nerves then through the brain. At the terminus of this process is the visual experience as of a tomato. But the tomato itself is only a remote cause of the experience one eventually undergoes. What you are actually directly perceiving is instead a *visual representation* of the tomato constructed through the activity of certain areas of the brain. This is ‘indirect realism’. It is a realism because it still thinks that the tomato represented in the experience really, objectively, exists.

Such an indirect realist understanding of the perceptual process is taken as read within much of the wider scientific community. Both Richard Dawkins and Stephen Hawking for instance tell us that what we see is a model of the real world. And decades earlier, Hiram McLendon reported Einstein as having expressed ‘great admiration’ for Russell’s defence of indirect realism.

However, there are counter-currents within cognitive science, and unequivocally direct theories of perception are championed

by James J Gibson (1904–1979) and his twenty-first century intellectual successors, notably within ‘radical embodied cognitive science’ and ‘ecological psychology’. Such theories constitute an avowedly radical unorthodoxy. Indeed, if Helmholtz is seen as the founding father of orthodox cognitive science, Gibson is the anti-establishment iconoclast who rejects much of what has gone before as on the wrong track and of little value.

Perhaps direct realist philosophers should join forces with Gibsonian cognitive science. However, it would be an unsustainable alliance, since Gibson and his successors defend direct perception at the expense of questioning the realist assumptions which underpin both contemporary analytic philosophy and mainstream science. Many of them are sympathetic to the phenomenological tradition of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty and question the experience-independent reality of the natural world. Some draw connections with Berkeley’s idealism (although Berkeley himself was at pains to state that the world exists independently of human perceptions, continually, in the mind of God). These are indeed major departures from direct realism’s realism claim. But such is the cost of defending its directness claim.

Conflict – What Conflict?

But perhaps, as some would argue, perception is direct in one sense and indirect in another?

Back in the 1950s, when linguistic philosophy was in the ascendant, Gilbert Ryle maintained that the philosophy of perception stands apart from the science of perception, and should confine itself to giving an account of how certain ‘perception’ words work. Few philosophers would now agree. Nevertheless, the vestiges of this demarcation remain, so that John Smythies refers disparagingly to those direct realists who claim that they are dealing with a logic of perception miraculously independent of scientific accounts of how perception actually works. This would reduce direct realism from being a robust defence of our intuitions of having direct perceptual access to the world, to what is, at best, a comparatively insubstantial claim. It would also be a pale shadow of the direct perception defended by Gibsonian cognitive science.

Peaceful coexistence and withdrawal into separate magisteria is not an option. That would not address the substantial metaphysical and epistemological issues at stake. Only philosophically sophisticated cognitive science, or scientifically savvy philosophy (call it what you may) has the resources to address the problem.

The Direct Realist’s Dilemma

Direct realism brings together the directness claim and the realism claim to defend our intuitions of direct perceptual access to an independent world. However, the debate within cognitive science brings to the fore the tension between the two claims which first emerged in the days of Berkeley and Locke. In the terms of twenty-first century cognitive science, you can have the directness claim, or the realism claim, but not both together. This presents direct realists with a dilemma.

There were very few direct realists amongst the Early Moderns, when Thomas Reid (1710–1796) was a lone voice in defending our pre-critical common sense intuitions. As I say, the rehabilitation of direct realism in the middle of the last century was

in large part motivated by the need for a theory of perception conducive to a newly ascendant physicalist worldview. Direct realism served this purpose well, since, by virtue of the directness claim there was no need for the mediating mind-dependent ‘sense data’ which appeared to be an essential feature of indirect realism. So far, so good. However, problems for direct realism arise when a physicalist understanding of the perceptual process is fleshed out in terms of cognitive science, since that science can’t get away from the idea that perception is mediated by processes in the brain. In this way, mainstream science rejects the notion of direct perception and is incompatible with the directness claim. An avowedly-radical Gibsonian minority defend direct perception, but only at the expense of rejecting the physicalist worldview and undermining its realism claim that the external world exists independently of being perceived.

Contemporary direct realists may still claim to be defending the notion of direct perception in a sense which is independent of our scientific understanding of the perceptual process. But such a defence would be the equivalent of getting off a drink-driving charge on a legal technicality whilst admittedly drunk at the wheel. The verdict may be in accordance with statute, but we wouldn’t want the accused driving the school bus. Nor would we want a theory of direct perception which was defended on merely technical linguistic grounds driving our worldview. At stake is no less than our understanding of this world in which we find ourselves, and our place within it.

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