

The Epistemic Superiority of Berkeley's Ideal Realism

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Abstract

In this essay, I analyze the three most prominent views regarding the philosophy of perception- direct realism, indirect realism, and ideal realism. I consider two relevant problems of perception, specifically the existence of hallucinations and perceptual relativity, and to what extent they are problematic for these views on perception. I first argue that direct realism, the view typically referred to as 'common-sense realism', is in fact far from common-sense. Although direct realists hold the common-sense view that we directly perceive physical objects, they are forced to hold the absurd view that we do not know what physical objects look, smell, taste, sound, or feel like. Further, they can never know if their perceptions are ontologically mind dependent or not. I then argue that although indirect realism is supposed to bypass the epistemic problems of perception bogging the direct realist down, its epistemic issues are at least as severe. Worse, an indirect realist cannot explain how an unperceived physical object could produce sensible qualities, and as such suffers from mind-body epistemic problems. I then argue that ideal realism, the view that physical objects cannot exist unperceived, is the most consistent and least problematic view regarding the philosophy of perception. I conclude that we should accept ideal realism as probably true on the basis of epistemic reasons alone.

Introduction

The primary focus of the philosophy of perception is to understand the ontological nature of what it is that we perceive by sense. There are three main views regarding what the ontological nature of sense experience is, being direct realism, indirect realism, and ideal realism. Direct realism is the view that "perception is an immediate or direct awareness of mind-independent physical objects or events in the external world." The term 'mind-independent physical objects' is synonymous with 'material objects'. The traditional proponent of direct realism was Thomas Reid. Indirect realism is the view

that perception is an immediate or direct awareness of mind-dependent non-physical representations of mind-independent physical objects, and mediate or indirect awareness of mind-independent physical objects or events in the physical world. The term 'mind-dependent non-physical representations of mind-independent physical objects' is synonymous with 'sense data'. The traditional proponents of indirect realism were Rene Descartes, and John Locke. Ideal realism is the view that perception is an immediate or direct awareness of mind-dependent physical objects or events. For an ideal realist, physical objects cannot exist unperceived, and the term 'mind-dependent physical objects' is synonymous with 'sensations'. The most notable ideal realist was Bishop George Berkeley.

In this essay, I argue that ideal realism is the most consistent view regarding the philosophy of perception. I begin by defining 'perceived by sense', and consequently provide other important definitions. I proceed to argue that direct realism, if true, commits its holders to radical epistemic skepticism. I then argue that indirect realism if true commits its holders to radical epistemic skepticism. Lastly, I argue that ideal realism is more epistemically consistent than direct and indirect realism. I conclude that we should accept ideal realism as probably right.

Definitions

I understand whatever that is perceived by sense as properly perceived by sense, or proper objects of the senses, following Aristotle and George Berkeley. I define what is properly perceived by sense as irreducibly phenomenal, wholly perceptible qualities that "would have been perceived if that same sense had then been first conferred on us", and things that are properly perceived are perceived by only one sense. Colors/light are thus the only proper objects of vision, sounds of hearing, tastes of the palate, odors of smell, and heat/hardness/solidity of touch. Proper objects of the senses are also immediately perceived by the senses, and by immediately perceived by the senses I mean perceived without being perceived via suggestion, and without being inferred to exist. Something is perceived via suggestion if we perceive it in virtue of it having some habitual connection grounded on experience with something we immediately perceive. For example, upon immediately hearing the word "red", the color red may present itself to our imagination. But, the color red is not perceived immediately by hearing, rather it is mediately apprehended

in virtue of the word we immediately hear, which we've come to associate with the visual color red through experience. Whatever is perceived via suggestion from wholly perceptible qualities which we immediately perceive by sense I define as mediately perceived. What we properly and immediately perceive by the senses can *suggest notions* (like emotions, truth, God, mind, and virtue) which though we've never properly and immediately perceived them, we have an understanding of what they are in virtue of their definitions or use in linguistic convention. Otherwise, what we properly and immediately perceive can *suggest* something we have *previously properly and immediately perceived by the senses* (like a sound or color), to the imagination- which is where all sensible things are represented- due to a frequently experienced connection between sensible qualities and notions, or between sensible qualities and other sensible qualities.

From that which we properly and immediately perceive by the senses, we can infer the *cause* of our sensible qualities through the use of reason. Thus for a direct and indirect realist, they will infer that a material object is the cause of their sensible qualities, while for an ideal realist, they will infer some mind is the cause of their sensible qualities. The sensible qualities previously properly and immediately perceived by sense that are suggested to the imagination by current proper objects of the sense can be termed improper objects of the sense. Those improper objects of the sense are mediately perceived by sense. When we properly perceive or hear the word 'red' by sound, it may suggest to the imagination an improper object of sound which is some visual quality we term as red, though the proper object of sound is strictly what is properly and immediately heard. In like manner, when we see fire, in strictness we properly and immediately perceive only colors, the heat we associate with the fire is suggested to our mind through experience. Thus, the hotness of the fire is an improper object of sight, being only suggested to the imagination through experience, and is a proper object of touch, being felt only properly, and immediately by sense. Things that are perceived wholly by the imagination, being not suggested or inferred to exist, are immediately perceived by the imagination. For example, when I imagine a red balloon existing in front of my face, it is not suggested or inferred to exist, and is thus immediately perceived, not by sense, but by the imagination.

Physical objects must be defined such that it is agreeable to all three views regarding the philosophy of perception.

The term 'physical object' are often conflated with 'material object', and even often are discussed hand-in-hand: "while 'physicalism' is no doubt related to 'physics' it is also related to 'physical object' and this in turn is very closely connected with 'material object', and via that, with 'matter.'" My definition of physical objects involves two important parts. First, physical objects occupy the area of extended space perceived immediately by sense. Second, the existence of physical objects are not ontologically dependent on the existence of other physical objects.

Physical objects occupy the *mediate* area of extended space perceived by sense, and their existence is not ontologically dependent on the existence of other physical objects for indirect realists. Sense data occupy the immediate area of extended space perceived by sense for indirect realists, but their existence is ontologically dependent on the existence of physical objects, and thus sense data are not physical objects. Physical objects occupy the *immediate* area of extended space perceived by sense, and their existence is not ontologically dependent on the existence of other physical objects for direct realists and ideal realists. For an ideal realist, however, the existence of physical objects is ontologically dependent on the existence of minds. It should be noted that objects perceived by the imagination are not perceived by sense, thus though I can imagine a red balloon occupying the visual space in front of me, it is perceived wholly by the imagination. I think it will be agreed upon on all hands that this is a neutrally acceptable definition of 'physical objects'.

Direct Realism

Direct realists believe that mind-independent physical objects or material objects are sometimes perceived by sense. In saying that material objects are sometimes perceived by sense, direct realists are committed to saying that material objects are then perceived properly, and immediately. When direct realists properly and immediately perceive a material object, they say that the material object appears, seems, or looks, sounds, tastes, smells, or feels a certain way to a certain person. For example, when a direct realist perceives an apple, they will say that they see a material object that looks round, and red. This apple, as it is in itself or objectively, can exist unperceived by any mind.

The direct realist however cannot say that they perceive an apple that *is* round and *is* red without being only arbitrary. Without an appeal to reason, there is no non-arbitrary way to

claim that the senses provide us with anything but mutually incompatible accounts of some property of a physical object. The way an object looks is relative to a perceiver and thus any way the object looks has just as good a right to be considered the real way the material object is as any other way the object looks. But this would be absurd, a determinate and unchanging material object cannot be composed of mutually incompatible properties. If any way the material object appears to us is the presentation of the objective material object, we could only be mediately aware of it because we have to reason which immediately perceived appearance can exist independently of a perceiver. But, as direct realists are committed to the claim that they perceive material objects without inference, they cannot claim a material object *is* a certain way only by sense, because it would entail an appeal to reason or an inference, or else would be only arbitrary. Thus, direct realists believe that they perceive material objects by sense which appear a certain way to them, but they do not know how the material object is in itself objectively, when unperceived. And, whatever criterion the direct realist appealed to for ascertaining the true qualities of the physical object could itself be challenged, for whatever reason one person gives seems no better than the criterion another gives. After all, we cannot discern whose unique perceptual apparatus is right for ascertaining the real qualities of an object, which object would appear different to everybody.

The existence of hallucinations seems to present a significant challenge to anyone grappling with the philosophy of perception. In hallucination, what is immediately perceived is not a mind-independent physical object. If you were to take a hallucinogenic drug such as LSD, you could hallucinate a pink elephant existing in your visual field. Now, if I was suddenly bestowed with your precise perceptual faculties and perceptual position, perhaps because our brains/minds were placed in each other's bodies, I would not experience pink elephants existing in my/your visual field, for I had not taken LSD. Thus, when we hallucinate, what we are aware of is not a mind-independent physical object. What we are aware of is something that is mind-dependent, being not perceived by sense, but wholly by the imagination. What we are aware of is then not a physical object because it does not exist in space. Given that we are direct realists, our hallucinations are therefore representations of mind-independent physical objects. Therefore, for direct realists, when hallucinations occur, what we are aware of are mind-dependent non-physical

representations of mind-independent physical objects which are perceived by the imagination.

This is similar to the definition of sense data I gave in paragraph one, but subtly and importantly different. Sense data are immediately perceived by *sense*; however, hallucinations are not perceived by sense, they are perceived wholly by the *imagination*, and are thus immediately perceived by the imagination. Sense data are representations of a physical object existing in some relationship with their correlative sense data. The hallucinations we experience would not stand in such a relationship, the pink elephant I see while hallucinating is not a mental representation of a pink elephant existing roughly in the place I seem to see it. It seems therefore, that assuming direct realism is true, the existence of hallucinations is something like a purely mental image. When we use our imagination to picture a blue rectangle, there is a mental image that is a blue rectangle immediately perceived by the imagination. This is what a direct realist can say happens in cases of hallucination, we perceive mental images just like we do in any direct application of the imagination, except that it is not due to our own volition that the mental images in hallucinations appear to us, like the occurrence of mental images normally is. Rather, the application of our imagination during hallucinations is something similar to the unconscious application of our imagination in our dreams.

Although the existence of hallucinations does not force the direct realist to accept the existence of sense data, like many philosophers have thought in the past, the existence of hallucinations provides a significant epistemological challenge for the direct realist. As Dicker put it, "the Argument from Hallucination... should not be regarded as an attempt to demonstrate that there are sense-data... the argument should be regarded as yet another way of calling attention... to... an epistemological problem concerning perception." The problem becomes evident if we accept direct realism as true, for, anytime we perceive something, I ask, can we ever know if that thing is *not* mind-dependent? If we sometimes perceive things that are mind-dependent mental images, but we cannot distinguish them from anything we perceive in veridical perception without an appeal to inference, then we can never know that we perceive material objects, or something that is not wholly dependent on our mind. Further, if direct realism is true, the streamlined argument from perceptual relativity that I presented shows that whenever we do perceive material objects, we do not know how they are in themselves or objectively, but

rather, some object with we know not what qualities appears a certain way to us. It would seem therefore, that we never know if or when we perceive mind independent objects, due to the existence of hallucinations, and even if we did, we would not know what they were like, due to the existence of perceptual relativity. Thus, although direct realism is not metaphysically inconsistent, its holder is plunged into perhaps the deepest epistemic skepticism imaginable.

Indirect Realism

Indirect realists believe that mind-independent physical objects or material objects are perceived mediately by sense, while only mind-dependent non-physical representations of these physical objects termed sense data are immediately perceived by sense. In saying that physical objects are not perceived immediately by sense, the indirect realist is committed to saying that material objects are justifiably inferred to exist from the sense data they perceive immediately. The supposition of sense data is supposed to help deal with the epistemological challenges presented to the direct realist. And, the supposition of the existence of mind-independent physical objects is supposed to make the existence of the immediate objects of perception (i.e. sense datum) more probable. An indirect realist will often infer the existence of physical objects in the likeness of the sense data they perceive immediately by sense to help explain the existence of the immediate objects of sense perception. When an indirect realist perceives an apple, they will often say that they see a sense datum that is round, and red, and which consequently gives them reason to suppose that there is a physical apple which is round, and red, that we perceive indirectly, insofar as it resembles its correlative sense datum. This apple, as it is in itself, or objectively, can exist unperceived by any mind, however the sense data cannot, as sense data exist necessarily in an object-perceiver relationship.

In saying that the sense datum is round, and red, the indirect realist is not being only arbitrary, for the way that sense data seem to us is the way that they are. The indirect realist accepts the principle that "if X appears F to S, and F is an irreducibly phenomenal, wholly perceptible quality, then S immediately perceives a sense datum that is F." Thus, since the apple appears or looks round and red, and since roundness and redness are properly perceived, and because the only things that are properly perceived are irreducibly phenomenal, wholly perceptible qualities, the sense datum actually is round and red.

However, in saying that the physical object or apple is round, and red, the indirect realist is not being only arbitrary, as the indirect realist is making an inference. The indirect realist is reasoning that the physical object is like the sense datum which they perceive immediately by sense. However, the indirect realist is fallible in their conjecture because they do not know how the physical object is with certainty. They can only make an educated guess as to how the material object is in itself; but since they are not immediately aware of the physical object, they can never know how the object is in itself. Thus, like the direct realist, whatever criteria the indirect realist gives could itself be challenged.

The existence of hallucinations presents a challenge to indirect realists, though it is less so a problem for the indirect realist than to a direct realist. What we are aware of in a hallucination is not a physical object because it does not exist in space. However, what we are aware of in hallucinations can be phenomenally indistinguishable from what we perceive in veridical perception. Thus, for indirect realists, without the application of reason it seems we cannot distinguish between whether we are perceiving a sense datum which represents a physical object by sense, or rather a hallucinatory image, which for an indirect realist I will call a mental image. I call it a mental image instead of a regular sense data because it is perceived wholly by the imagination, and not by sense. There are some who would call the objects perceived in hallucinations sense datum, but the term 'sense datum' implies that there is a physical object which is mediately perceived when a sense datum is perceived. However, during hallucination, like while in a dream, no physical object is perceived at all; *ergo* to call the object of perception in hallucination a sense datum would be erroneous. I therefore conclude that the object of hallucinatory perception is merely a mental image.

The indirect realist has the advantage over the direct realist with regards to the existence of hallucinations because when indirect realists perceive something immediately, they can be sure that they are perceiving something immediately that is mind-dependent. The direct realist cannot know if they are perceiving something that is mind-dependent, or mind-independent immediately by sense, for they know not if they are perceiving either a physical / material object, or a mental image. The indirect realist, conversely, knows that they immediately perceive either a sense datum, or a mental image, both of which are *dependent* on the mind of the

perceiver. Unfortunately for the indirect realist, the existence of hallucinations still provides a difficult epistemic challenge that they must overcome. Whenever an indirect realist perceives, they can never know whether they perceive a physical object indirectly or not. Although the indirect realist knows the object of immediate perception is mind-dependent, and is in this sense in an epistemically privileged position in relation to a direct realist, they know not if there is really an object of mediate perception, i.e. a physical object in its place, wherever that may be.

The indirect realist is, like the direct realist, bogged with at least two severe, epistemic, perceptual problems. In the first place, the indirect realist can never know whether they are perceiving a physical, material object or not due to the existence of hallucinations. Although the indirect realist can be certain that the direct or immediate object of perception will always be mind-dependent, they can never know if they perceive an object that exists independently of sense perception or not. Secondly, even if the indirect realism was true and we could sometimes infer the existence of material objects we perceive mediately, we could never know with certainty what the physical object looked like.

Berkeley also pointed out that an indirect realist does not know how mind-independent (material) objects could produce mind-dependent qualities (sense datum). Neither do we know how material objects could act upon mind, nor do we know how a mind-independent object could imprint a sense datum on our mind, especially if the sense datum is not like the object. Further, we would have the same reason to believe a material object exists whether it did or not, as is evident by the existence of hallucinations or dreams. It seems therefore, that the existence of sensible qualities is not better explained by the existence of mediately perceived material objects, because an indirect realist does not know how a material object could cause sense data. The problems of perception and mind seem to make indirect realism epistemically unattractive.

Ideal Realism

Ideal realists believe that everything that is perceived are ideas, which exist only in the mind. I define ideas as irreducibly phenomenal, wholly perceptible, mind-dependent qualities. Ideas are perfectly known, as they contain nothing in them besides for how they appear to our mind. However, there are two types of ideas, being mind-dependent *physical*

objects termed 'sensations' or 'real things' which are perceived by sense, and mind-dependent *non-physical* representations of mind-dependent physical objects termed 'thoughts' or 'images of things', or 'mental images' which are perceived by the imagination. Sensations or real things are properly and immediately perceived, being imprinted on the senses. Thoughts or images of things are either immediately, or mediately perceived, being perceived mediately by the senses or immediately by the imagination. When thoughts are suggested to the imagination by sensations which are properly and immediately perceived, they are mediately and improperly perceived by sense, and represented by the imagination. When thoughts are not suggested to the imagination, but are perceived wholly by the imagination, they are immediately perceived by the imagination, being not suggested or inferred to exist. Thus, when an ideal realist perceives an apple, they will say that they see a sensation or physical object that is round, and red. This apple, as it is in itself, or objectively, cannot exist unperceived by any mind.

In saying that the apple is round, and red, the ideal realist is not being arbitrary. The way that physical objects appear for ideal realists is the way that they are. The ideal realist accepts the principle that "if X appears F to S, and F is an irreducibly phenomenal, wholly perceptible quality, then S immediately perceives a sensation that is F." Thus, since the apple appears or looks round and red, and since roundness and redness are properly perceived, and because the only things that are properly perceived are irreducibly phenomenal, wholly perceptible qualities, the apple actually is round and red. Ideal realists therefore believe that they perceive sensations by sense which appear a certain way to them, and this is how the physical object is in itself or objectively, because all physical objects are the way that they appear to us. Thus, for an ideal realist, there is no problem of perceptual relativity, for everything that is perceived is an idea that is a certain way, unlike a direct realist who can never tell when they perceive the true qualities of the object, and unlike an indirect realist who can never tell to what extent, or even if their sense data resembles its correspondent object.

The existence of hallucinations presents an epistemic challenge to ideal realists similar to the indirect realist, but it is less significant of a problem for ideal realists than it is for the indirect or the direct realist. What we are aware of in hallucinations is not a physical object because it does not exist

in immediate extended space. However, what we are aware of in hallucinations are phenomenally indistinguishable from what we perceive in veridical perception. Thus, for ideal realists, without the application of fallible reason, it seems we cannot distinguish between whether we are perceiving a physical object or sensation by sense, or rather a hallucinatory thought by the imagination.

Like the indirect realist, the ideal realist can always know that the immediate object of perception is mind-dependent. However, the existence of hallucinations is less of a problem for the ideal realist than for the direct and indirect realists because direct and indirect realists can never be sure if they perceive something that can exist wholly unperceived at all. When a hallucinogenic sensible quality is perceived, something that is exclusively mind-dependent is perceived, as opposed to in veridical perception. But sometimes hallucinations are phenomenally indistinguishable from veridical perception. Thus, direct and indirect realists could never know if they perceive something that can exist wholly unperceived, regardless of it being perceived directly or indirectly. However, for ideal realists, they can always be sure that they perceive nothing that is mind independent, for ideal realists only perceive ideas, and ideas are wholly mind dependent qualities. And, although ideal realists may have difficulty distinguishing sensations from thoughts without the use of reason, they still know that however they are appeared to by ideas is how that idea really is, for the existence of an idea consists wholly in its being perceived.

Conclusion

Although the existence of hallucinations provides an epistemic challenge to ideal realists, it is negligible compared to the epistemic challenge it provides to direct and indirect realists. Further, the epistemic challenge provided by the existence of perceptual relativity makes direct and indirect realism look further unattractive. That is because direct and indirect realists can never know how physical objects really are, even if and when they are perceived. This same point does not apply to ideal realists, who are aware of the way physical objects are when they are perceived. There is thus no problem of perceptual relativity for an ideal realist, for their ideas are perfectly known. Lastly, indirect realists have epistemic concerns regarding the mind body problem that appear impossibly to remedy. I conclude my essay by saying that if we

look at the facts, ideal realism provides the most consistent and least paradoxical view regarding epistemic knowledge and the philosophy of perception, and as such should be considered more likely true.

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