

How to be a (direct) realist

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My aim in this paper is arguing for a certain version of direct realism, which I take to be the best way of being (simply) realist about the existence of the external world. The idea is that, if one wants to be a realist about the existence of the external world (and I take for granted, without justification, that one should want it), one should endorse a direct-realist theory of perception. In other words, realism is best vindicated by direct realism in philosophy of perception.

I will also argue that, even if there are different versions of direct realism, the version that best warrants realism is a non-representational and relational (or “object-constituting”) view according to which: *i*) perceptual experience is *not* a representational state; and *ii*) ordinary objects are *constituents* of perceptual experience. By saying that *bona fide* real objects are constitutive of the experience I mean that what seems to one to perceive in a (veridical) perceptual act is a real object or, at any rate, some pieces of the world (e.g., a lay-out of surfaces, or parts of an object).

In the first section I explain why direct realism is the proper way of vindicating realism. The second section is devoted to a critical discussion of two representational accounts of direct realism. In the last section I sketch the non-representational relational view, trying to discharge it from the most serious objections.

1. Setting the stage: (simple) realism and direct realism

Despite a few tenacious opponents, realism about the existence of an external world independent of perceiving subjects (i.e., about the existence of ordinary physical objects occupying places outside our body) is not a position that can be seriously given up. Yet, it is arguably impossible to provide a conclusive refutation of skepticism¹. However one proposes to cope with skepticism, a crucial role is played by perception: veridicality, or objectivity, of perception seems to be a necessary ingredient of any strategy to vindicate realism. As Bonjour (2007) points out, justifying realism requires both a certain view of the nature of perceptual experience and an account of the relation between experience and perceptual beliefs. To put it roughly, we need a realist theory of perception –i.e., a theory capable of vindicating the ontological subject-independency of what we experience in a perceptual act– and a theory validating the reliability of the process by which perceptual beliefs are derived from perceptual experience. Here, however, I shall be concerned only with the former issue.

Therefore, the question is: what theory of perception can best justify realism?² What we want is a theory of perception implying that the ordinary objects that we take as given to us in a perceptual act, such as tables, chairs, books etc., are real (are really out there) and exist independently of us. To be sure, almost all current theories of perception are realist. Indeed, all theories are intended to account for the difference between veridical and non-veridical experience, taking for granted that the veridical case is the ordinary case. Yet, there are different accounts of perceptual

¹I am inclined to think that the best strategy to cope with skepticism consists in showing that it is hard to make sense of it, in a more or less Wittgensteinian vein (see especially his *On Certainty*).

²Here a *caveat* is in order. One should not interpret “justify” as a sort of demonstration. One cannot provide a theory of perception that *shows* that realism is true, since realism is rather *presupposed* by any realist theory of perception. Yet, different ways of working out the concept of (perceptual) experience result in more or less robust formulations of realism.

experience, resulting in different ways of being committed to realism (or, from a slightly different point of view, in different degrees of commitment to realism). My starting hypothesis is that the most effective way of being a perceptual realist is subscribing to *direct realism*, or, more precisely, to a certain version of direct realism, which I take it to be the only *genuine* version.

Direct realism is the thesis according to which when a subject has a perceptual experience (*genuinely* perceptual –hallucinations are not considered), he is in direct contact with objects or lay-outs of surfaces in the external world. It is very difficult to spell out what ‘direct’ exactly means, but I think that the idea is intuitively clear: in order to figure out what this directness or immediacy is, you have just to take your perceptual phenomenology at face value. Anyway, I shall specify later on what are my requirements for direct realism.

There are five *prima facie* reasons to think that direct realism is true:

1) (*phenomenological reason*) Experience presents itself as a direct relation to external objects and properties, in a twofold sense: *a*) what is given in the experience appears to be actual, immediately present and distinct from us (we could call it “principle of actual presence”); and *b*) the experienced properties appear to be properties of external objects (not properties of the experience itself)—this is the well-known “principle of transparency” (see Harman 1990; Martin 2002).

2) (*explanatory reason*) Our actions are usually successful. For instance, I can grasp the object I am looking at. The most straightforward explanation of this fact is that we perceive the objects themselves.

3) (*explanatory/evolutionary reason*) The function of perception is probably that of allowing us to access the world in such a way to make our behavior most effective. Arguably, this goal is best attained when what is immediately presented in experience is the world itself.

4) (*epistemological reason*) Direct realism is the account of perception which best grounds the veridicality of perceptual knowledge (this is the reason that led me to introduce direct realism as a position worth defending).

5) (*semantic reason*) Direct realism is the account of perception that best justifies our referential uses of words –for instance, the fact that the word ‘chair’ refers to real chairs.

To be sure, *prima facie* reasons are far from being conclusive reasons. Perhaps the only uncontroversial reason is the first. Indeed it is a platitude, an obvious fact, that in a perceptual act it *seems* to us that we are in an unmediated relation with external objects in the world. But, of course, direct realism is the thesis that in a veridical perceptual event we are *really* in an unmediated relation with external objects. The principles of actual presence and transparency only state that, *ceteris paribus*, we should prefer a direct realist account of experience (with respect to an indirect one), but this can by no means be considered as a mandatory requirement.

Now, what does the expression “to be in an unmediated relation” mean? It is very easy to offer a negative characterization of this condition (for instance, as the denial of the existence of sense-data); but what I would like to give is a positive characterization: if direct realism amounted merely to the denial of the existence of sense-data, then being committed to direct realism would be too easy! There would almost no price to pay.

The most plausible candidate is the following: what appears to one, or what one seems to perceive, in a perceptual experience (I henceforth assume that ‘perceptual’ implies a relation with the external world³) is a real object (or, more precisely, a *part* of a real object—for the sake of simplicity I shall ignore this qualification, which,

³I include in the class of perceptual experiences even most illusions. Therefore, on my view, the great divide is between perceptions and hallucinations.

nevertheless, I regard as being an important point). And, in its most straightforward interpretation, this claim should be understood as requiring that the object should be a *constituent* of the experience. I shall call this formulation of direct realism “object-involving” or “object-constituting”, exactly to stress that the object must be a constituent of the experience, in the sense that what is given to me in the experience is the real object. I shall also refer to the claim that the object is a constituent of the experience as the “relational principle”.

Now, at least three families of theories of perception are usually regarded as direct-realist (or, at least, as compatible with direct realism): causal theories, representational theories and disjunctive theories. However, if, as I am proposing here, direct realism is taken to require the relational principle, then only disjunctive theories and a few versions of the representational theory (the “Russellian” ones, according to which the content of a perceptual state is a proposition constituted by real objects and properties) meet the requirement. My aim is not to advocate a *specific* theory, but, rather, to show that, for the purposes of offering the best vindication of realism, a non-representational account of perception is to be preferred.

In next section I take into consideration two specific theories, Lowe’s causal theory and Burge’s representational theory. As I shall try to show, both these theories are non-relational versions of direct realism and for this reason they are not direct-realist enough.

2. Varieties of direct realism

Disjunctive theories come in different versions, but they share, at least in the standard cases, the commitment to the relational principle that I take to be indispensable for direct realism. Burge (2005; see also 2010, Ch. 9) and Lowe (2008) both challenge disjunctive theories, pointing to two distinct problems that arguably have the same root. Burge conceives the problem as an inconsistency between the

disjunctive theory and the allegedly non-negotiable *Principle of Proximality*. According to Lowe, on the other hand, the inconsistency is between disjunctivism and the *Principle of Ontological Independence* of the experience from the object.

Let me start with Lowe. He argues that the intrinsic character of experience does not ontologically depend on the state of the physical environment, because causation is not an ontological dependency. What Lowe has in his mind is that the existence of an object O is not a necessary condition for having an experience as-of an O, that is, an experience that the subject would describe (accurately or otherwise) as an experience of an O. Indeed two experiences, a veridical one and a hallucinatory one, could have the same intrinsic character. Since in the case of hallucination there is no object at all, the intrinsic character of the experience cannot depend on the object (this is manifestly an application of the argument from hallucination/illusion).

The independency of experience from the object definitely implies the rejection of the disjunctive theory. But, clearly, it also implies the rejection of direct realism as I have defined it. In fact, the thesis of independence is incompatible with the relational principle, according to which the external object is a constituent of experience.

Since, in his defence of the causal theory of perception (CTP), Lowe presents himself as a supporter of direct realism, he must be committed to a different version of it. In order to explicate what this version amounts to, I start from his claim that "CTP maintains that the causation in perception operates only on the *intrinsic* character of perceptual experiences, not on their content." (Lowe 2008, p. 104). The idea seems to be the following: representational content is not an intermediary between the subject and the object, since it is not part of the causal chain linking (in

the case of veridical perception) the object to the experience⁴. There are no intermediaries at all: there is the object, there is the experience, and the experience puts in touch the subject with the object --the subject is in touch with the object through the experience.

Although this account is coherent, I take it to be less plausible than object-constituting direct realism, for a couple of reasons.

First, representational content and intrinsic character turn out to be artificially separated. Representational content becomes an entirely abstract notion that seems to have little to do with the experience. The fact that experience is intrinsically a representation is, so to speak, detached from what the experience is for the subject. Yet, what is content, if it is not "what appears" to the subject, or, put in slightly different terms, the way an object or state of things is given to the subject?

Second, it is difficult to make sense of the idea that the subject is "in touch" with the object if what appears to the subject in a perceptual experience is *not* the object itself, as the principle of ontological independency seems to imply. In other words, Lowe explicitly denies that the object is a constituent of the experience, yet this is exactly what seems to follow from the claim that, in the experience, the subject is "in touch" with the object. The very fact that Lowe removes the content from the causal chain seems to suggest that he is worried by the possibility that there is "something" in the experience that "screens off" the object from the subject.

Admittedly, neither reason is strong enough to disqualify Lowe's direct realism. The first objection raises a problem more for his notion of content (and the related

⁴ Indeed Lowe explicitly claims that one thing is the content and another thing is the intrinsic character of experience; and he leaves room for either an internalist or an externalist interpretation of his causal theory, accordingly to the content being intrinsic or extrinsic to experience; in both cases the content does not "screen off" the object from the subject (or from the experience).

kind of representationalism involved⁵) than for his direct-realist view. As to the second, Lowe may reply that the intrinsic character of the experience is the way the object is given, and the way the object is given is not a representation –it is not something that separates the subject from the object.

In conclusion, I do not have a knock-down argument against Lowe's account of direct realism. However, Lowe's direct realism is a bit elusive insofar as, as a consequence of the principle of ontological independency, it makes the presence of the object in the experience a contingent fact, thereby undermining the very character of perception. Or, from a slightly different point of view, the problem is that Lowe's concept of perceptual experience loses that intimate link between the subject and the world that is characteristic of perception (this has been nicely dubbed the "detachment problem", namely, the problem that "any non-disjunctivist view on perceptual experience seems to drive a fatal wedge between the perceptual experience and the world", Zucca 2015, p. 300). A full-blooded direct realism requires the relational principle.

Let us now turn to Burge. As I said above, at the core of Burge's picture there is the principle of proximity, which states that:

Holding constant the antecedent psychological set of the perceiver, a given type of *proximal stimulation* (over the whole body), together with associated internal afferent and efferent input into the perceptual system, will produce a given type of perceptual state, assuming that there is no malfunctioning in the system and no interference with the system. (Burge 2005, p. 22)

Under these hypotheses, if a change in the distal stimulus (in the object) is not registered in the proximal stimulus (counterfactually speaking), the experience of the subject will not change.

⁵ After all, Lowe is not forced to embrace representationalism, even if most of what he says seems to be at least compatible with the representational account.

Burge argues for this claim by discussing the case of two perceptual events such that one event differs from the other only by being involved a numerically distinct perceived object. For instance, the event A is the perception of a certain car, while the event B is the perception of a distinct but qualitatively identical car. Since the two cars are type-identical (they share all the properties except their position in the time-space), the two experiential events are also identical. In fact the two objects determine an identical proximal stimulus, thus they cannot be discriminated by the subject.

Therefore, the principle of proximity⁶ turns out to be inconsistent with direct realism (in my formulation). Burge also takes this as a *reductio* of the disjunctive theory, insofar as science of perception depends on proximity, and so the disjunctive theory turns out to be inconsistent with science⁷. This is a crucial point to which I return in the last section.

Burge's position is similar, in certain respects, to Lowe's. However, while Lowe does not explicitly favour an option between internalism and externalism (for the sake of the defence of his causal theory), Burge is nothing less than the father of externalism in philosophy of mind (Burge 1979; for the specific case of perception, see Burge 1986). This raises the first problem, because the principle of proximity fits better with the internalist point of view. How can we reconcile Burge's commitment to the principle of proximity with his avowal of externalism?

A tentative answer is that, in the case of perception, Burge is committed to a *mild* externalism, a Fregean variety of externalism, whose core idea is that perceptual content "is not the referent, but the mode of presentation" (2005, p. 7). This seems to

⁶ As Campbell (2010) points out, perhaps there is a conspicuous idealization in the proximity principle. However, the following "statistical" reformulation could be accepted: in an ordinary context, with nothing unusual going on, sameness of proximal stimulus in that context is fairly highly correlated with sameness of conscious experience.

⁷ Here Burge has in his mind computational psychology.

accommodate the principle of proximity, but it is arguably insufficient to vindicate externalism. However, Burge also claims that the representational content of perceptual states is partly individuated "in terms of what causes these states", i.e., the external objects and properties. It is unclear to me how this fits together with the identification of the content with the mode of presentation. The idea is probably that the mode of presentation *depends* on the object. This cannot be interpreted as though the object were part of the content, otherwise the principle of proximity would fail; on the other hand, it is unclear to what extent the dependency of the mode of presentation from the object is sufficient for vindicating externalism⁸.

According to Burge (2005, p. 30), perception is direct insofar as *i*) the constituents of a perceptual representation *refer* to external items and *ii*) perception is non-inferential (the transformations operated by, e.g., the visual system, are not inferences). I fully agree on the second point and I could even agree on the first (it depends on how one takes perceptual representations to be, see section 3 below), but I do not believe that these claims warrant direct realism. The first point, in particular, suggests that the perceptual relation between the subject and the reality is mediated by a representation. The idea is that the subject is "in touch" with the object *through the representation* (whereas in Lowe the subject is in touch with the object through experience. If experience *is* a representation, the two positions turn out to be very similar).

Therefore Burge's formulation of direct realism is hardly perspicuous either. I think that Burge goes in the right direction when he tries to characterise the content of perception by saying that it is the object given in a certain way; still, it is not clear enough that this representational content does not work as a "veil". On the other

⁸ Indeed, Frege's semantics is usually not regarded as a form of externalism. Note, moreover, that to say that the content is *individuated* in terms of external items only implies that the content is described in a certain way (by *referring* to external items); no real metaphysical consequence can be drawn.

hand, there is a real difficulty here for anyone is interested in defending a robust version of direct realism: since in a perceptual act (indeed, in any mental state) the object is always given in a certain way –there is no such thing as perceiving the object “as such”--, it is tempting to say that any perceptual act involves a representation, so that our access to the world is always mediated by a representation. Yet, this is exactly the picture that a genuine direct realist should want to dismantle, because the notion of representation necessarily involves an obtrusive intermediary between the subject and the object. The challenge is to acknowledge the idea that the object is always given in a certain way without succumbing to a form of *indirect* realism. In section 3 I try to sketch a non-representational and relational account that is nevertheless able at the same time to account for the indisputable fact that there is (always) a way the object is given (or presented), which depends on certain bodily and arguably mental facts.

3. A plea for a direct-realist relational view

As I have said several times in this article, direct realism requires the object to be *in* the experience (i.e., what is given in the experience is the real object), and, if perceptual experiences are representations, it is hard to escape the detachment problem –the impression that experience is “disconnected” from the world—because representations are not world-involving; they are at most world-dependent. However, it is hard to understand how the object can be the constituent of the experience, if we think of the experience as a *mental, internal state*. And trying to stop thinking of perceptual experience as a mental state is not an easy task. Yet, I think that this is exactly what we should do (as standard disjunctivists indeed suggest): we should stop thinking perceptual experiences as sensations (cf. Campbell 2010) and as mental states in standard sense (i.e., as “internal” properties of a subject). Let me explain.

What is perceptual experience? How should we characterise it? In the experience something is given to us, but what is given is not given as something mental, or internal (i.e., in the head), whatever this exactly means. It is given as being outside there. From this point of view, there is a deep phenomenal difference between propositional thought and perception. And there also is a difference, though less dramatic, between imagery and perception.

Of course, phenomenology does not have the last word. It is well known that phenomenology is often deceptive. Yet I think there are certain aspects in phenomenology that should be taken seriously. In particular, I think that if phenomenology deceived us about the issue at stake here, our view of reality would be too shaken. Moreover, even when phenomenology is in certain respects wrong, philosophers usually claim that an account should be given for phenomenal facts: we can argue that phenomenology is wrong, but we are called on to explain why it goes wrong. If we are unable to do that, we should *prima facie* take phenomenology at face value.

So, my starting point is that we face an apparent difference between the phenomenology of perceptual experience and the phenomenology of thought (including imagery). There seem to be at least two ways of explaining such a difference:

1) Both what is given in perception and what is given in thought are “manufactured” by the brain. Materials used in these manufacturings are partly different⁹, and it is this difference that explains phenomenal differences. To put it shortly, there is more information in perception, creating the impression of reality.

⁹More rigorously: there are some areas activated during perceptual processing of a certain stimulus (say, a cat) that are not activated when I think of or imagine that cat.

2) There is something in perception that is not manufactured by the brain: real objects. The perceptual system was selected so as to (and is organised in such a way as to) keep us in touch, in contact, with the world. The perceptual system *presents* the world, not an image or any other kind of representation of it. By contrast, when I'm *thinking* of an object, since of course the object is not perceptually available, the thought presents an image or another kind of representation of the object. Even if we (correctly) say that the object of thought is a real object (e.g., when I think of my wallet, it is my wallet "in flesh and blood" that I think of), necessarily, there must be a mental vehicle of the object of my thought.

Explanation 1 implies indirect realism, since what I perceive is an image created by the mind/brain. Explanation 2 is a commitment to direct realism. In the former, phenomenology is to a certain extent deceptive, insofar as it hides the mental nature (of the contents) of experience. In the latter, phenomenology is not deceptive: what is given to me in perception seems to be out there because it *really is* out there. Note that in the latter case I can say that my thought refers to (or is about) a given object, but I cannot say that my perceptual experience refers to (or is about) that object, because the object is "inside" the experience –the object is constitutive of the experience.

In section 1 I provided some reasons for direct realism. Over and above the already familiar phenomenological and epistemological reasons, I recall the explanatory argument from the success of action: indirect realism is much harder to believe because, if my perceptual contents (understood, neutrally, as what is given in my perceptual experiences) were mental entities, then even my action would be directed to mental entities, and this seems absurd¹⁰. To put it in a nutshell: *thought is*

¹⁰ Actually, the argument requires more elaboration. In fact, according to indirect realism, when I grasp an object, I am "in touch" with the object only through the mediation of a tactile representation. Yet, this seems to me even harder to believe. Note, moreover, that one could construct a semantic version of the argument: if perceptual contents were mental entities, ordinary words such as 'chair' or 'table' would refer to representations.

representational, but perception is not. The role of thought is exactly to “re-create” the world in absence, in order to make plans, figure out how things might be, etc. Representations make possible this goal. By contrast, the role of perception consists basically in making us able to “navigate” successfully in the environment; therefore the world is directly involved. When I am thinking, I can “bracket” the world, but when I am in a perceptual state I cannot bracket the world, it is a logical impossibility.

What I have said so far does not amount to denying that what I perceive depends also on mental operations. As we saw above, the object is always given in a certain way, and the way we perceive it is determined, in part, by the way our perceptual system works. Nevertheless, it is the object that we perceive. The dependence on mental operations does not imply that experiences are representations (more on this later).

There are at least three major objections that can be made to this account. I present and discuss them in reverse order of the threats they pose: from the least harmful to the most harmful. The first objection is a variation on the evergreen theme of the argument from illusion: there are mental states (e.g., hallucinations) that can be phenomenally identical to perceptual states, and the easiest explanation of this fact is that the two mental states are of one and the same kind. Second, the relational account implies two contradictory claims: *i)* the real object is a cause of the experience; *ii)* the real object is constitutive of the experience. Third, the relational account is in conflict with cognitive science (specifically, with the computational theory of vision).

There are familiar answers (set out long since in Austin 1962) to the first objection. I shall say just a couple of words. Essentially, the answer is that there is no reason to take the phenomenological indiscriminability as a criterion for identity. To assume the phenomenological criterion is to concede too much to a scarcely plausible

subjectivist point of view –to the idea of the primacy of the concept of (first person) *experience*. Even if there could be a hallucination phenomenally identical to a perception (after all, it is in virtue of the phenomenal quality of the hallucination that the subject takes it as a genuine perception), the hallucination and the perceptual state are different states because hallucination is a product, or a kind, of *thought*: its etiology and its causal role are different, and this is enough to disqualify the implication from phenomenal identity to mental type-identity.

As to the second objection (= how can a real object outside there be the cause of the experience and a constituent of the experience at the same time? If the object is a cause of E, then is distinct from E, so it cannot be a constituent of E), there is an immediate, straightforward answer, and a more elaborate one. The straightforward answer is: “so much for the idea that perception is a causal relation”. The concept of causation does not cast light on the nature of perception, so we had better get rid of it. However, since many might be dissatisfied by this too hasty reply, I give another one: the object is a constituent of the experience in the sense that experience is a *relation* between a subject and an object. Its constituents are the subject and the object; the object is a constituent of the experience insofar as it is a *relatum*. Thus, again, the impression that causality and constituency cannot go together comes from taking experience as a mental property intrinsic of a subject. But we are not forced to characterise the experience this way, and we should refrain from doing it.

As to the third objection, I think that it can be presented in two (related) ways. First, the objector complains that the relational account denies the existence of representations, whereas the concept of representation is pivotal in cognitive science. The answer is that the relational account is perfectly compatible with the existence of representations, provided they are conceived of as subpersonal structures, and it is in *this* sense that cognitive science talks about representations. But these “representations” (admittedly, an unhappy expression, though, like almost

everybody, I myself have used it many times) are not experiential, that is, are not personal contents, stand-ins for real objects. They are just pieces of information playing a role in certain theories. The point can further be clarified by taking into consideration the other way of couching the objection, the Burgean argument based on the proximality principle. What does it mean that science conforms to the proximality principle? It does not mean that it individuates perceptual states in a non-relational way, since computational vision science is not particularly interested in ordinary (i.e. experiential) perceptual states. There is a sense in which science is committed to a principle of proximality: it is the fact that scientific explanations usually take proximal, rather than distal, causes as prior (this claim should be taken with some caveats that I cannot discuss here). Yet, it seems to me clear that this has nothing to do with direct realism. Direct realism does not concern at all either subpersonal states or scientific explanations¹¹.

What I am suggesting is a “no-content” view of perception. According to Hutto & Myin (2013), the no-content view implies also the rejection of computational psychology. Therefore they agree with Burge’s premise that the relational view is incompatible with computational cognitive science, but draw the opposite conclusion: so much the worse for computational cognitive science. However, their motivations for this conclusion depend clearly on further assumptions (such as the implication from the concept of information to the concept of content) that are far from being uncontroversial. As I have tried to show, endorsing a certain view of perceptual experience (relational rather than non-relational) is independent of the adoption of a certain kind of explanation in cognitive science.

The problem with science, if anything, is that some (most?) scientists seem to endorse *indirect* realism. Take, for instance, the following claims made by the very

¹¹ A similar argument based on the (relative) independency of personal states from subpersonal states can be found in Nanay (2015) and McDowell (1994).

influential neuroscientist Chris Frith: "my mind can have no knowledge about the physical world that isn't somehow represented in the brain" (Frith 2007: 23); "even if all our senses are unimpaired and our brain works properly, we have no direct access to the physical world. We may have the sensation of having a direct access, but this is a brain-made illusion" (*ibid.*: 44)¹². Or consider the following quotation from the distinguished Italian psychologist Paola Bressan, who, though quite unwilling to be involved in philosophical puzzles, claims that "The expression *to construct the world* could seem a poetic way of saying, but it is not. When you look around, you don't have the impression of constructing things (...). But this feeling only depends on the great speed and skillfulness of the building process (...). Our experience of objects is entirely created by the brain" (Bressan 2007, p. 119, translation from Italian is mine).

Is there a way to reconcile these statements with direct realism? My answer is that there is a tension only if one adopts a brain-centred attitude. The perceptual relation between the subject and the world is one thing; it is quite another what the brain does (computes) in order to sustain this relation. These are two (actually, more than two) different levels of description, and there is no reason to consider the lower level "more real" or "more veridical" than the upper level. True, if one wants to say that only brain facts are real, then direct realism is, like the quoted authors appear to say, an *illusion*. But consider that the brain is at the service of the body (or of the agent), and it is the body in the first place that is involved in the perceptual relation. Direct realism is a thesis concerning the relation between an agent and its environment, not a relation between the brain and its "environment". Therefore the direct character of the relation between an agent and its environment at high (i.e., personal) level can go together the indirect character of the relation between perceptual "representations" and the external world at low (i.e., subpersonal) level.

¹² In a similar vein, Thomas Metzinger (2003) claims that the content of perceptual experience is so perfect an image of the world that we do not realize that it is an image. The transparency of experience is an illusion ceaselessly created by the brain.

In order to best understand this view, we should think of brain operations as a machinery allowing subjects to be in touch with objects. In some cases, our action does not even require a rich model of the world –there is no representation of the object, at any level. In other cases (such as categorisation) a rich model is required. But even in this case, what one is in touch to is the real object; the underlying representation determines how the object is seen, not the object itself.

Undoubtedly, there are many further details in this view that need to be fixed in order to answer all the problems, including those problems that I have not taken into consideration (or I have just alluded to) here. Just to give an example, I should have shown that the proposed version of direct realism does not collapse into a sort of “ultra-naïve” realism according to which the perceived properties of the object are simply the “real” properties of the object. But this is not a task for today.

I do not pretend either to have refuted representationalism; more modestly, I hope to have convinced the reader that the formulation of direct realism is easier in a relational non-representational account, and that the simple realism about the existence of the external world is better vindicated by the kind of the relational direct realism that I have sketched.

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