

How to be a (direct) realist*

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My aim in this paper is twofold. First, I argue that subscribing to direct realism in the philosophy of perception is 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. Second, I argue that providing a convincing justification of direct realism is very hard, since all versions of direct realism (essentially, the representational one and the relational one) face problems. My conclusion will be, therefore, somewhat pessimistic: direct realism is more a requirement for a theory of perception than a properly justified substantive thesis.

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 Burge's representational account of direct realism, which I take as an exemplar case study. In the last section I discuss the relational view, arguing that, although it is the best way to account for direct realism, still it faces at least one difficult problem.

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

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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 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*.

Direct realism is the thesis according to which, when a subject has a perceptual experience (*genuinely* perceptual –hallucinations are not relevant to realism), he is in direct contact with objects or layouts 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.

The reason why I think that direct realism with respect to perception is the best way to account for realism in general is very simple: perception is our primary,

¹ I 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*).

² Here 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.

fundamental source of knowledge –as Burge effectively puts it, «origins of empirical objectivity lie in perception» (2010, p. 107)–; therefore, the more perception is reliable, the more realism will be warranted, and being committed to direct realism is clearly the most plausible strategy to ensure the reliability of perception. The following remarks on direct realism should provide further evidence for this claim.

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 action is 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? The most plausible interpretation 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 world, that is, ‘to perceive’ is factive³) is a real object (or, more precisely, a *part* of a real object—for the sake of simplicity I shall ignore this qualification, though it is by no means a minor point). To say this is not enough, however. In fact, there are at least two families of theories that pretend to be compatible with this claim.

According to what is arguably the most straightforward interpretation, the claim should be intended as implying that the object is a *constituent* of the experience. I shall call this position, which is endorsed by disjunctivists, “object-involving” or “relational” direct realism. Indeed this view is often described in literature as “relationalism”. According to the other interpretation, we perceive a real object by *representing* it: on the representational view, in the experience we perceive directly real objects, but these are not constituents of experience⁴.

Unfortunately, the picture is complicated by the fact that relationalism may be compatible with representationalism: if a perceptual state is taken to have a so-called “Russellian” representational content, representational theories turn out to be relational too. In fact, Russellian content includes among its constituents worldly objects and properties.

Now, for the sake of simplicity, I shall not take into consideration the Russellian content view, because, I would say, it compounds the shortcomings of both the positions. Indeed, as I shall argue in the next sections, I think that direct realism is more “at home” with relationalism, precisely insofar as relationalism (whatever are its problems) is construed as a non-representational account. Therefore, on my view, the Russellian content picture tries to put together two ideas that are better to be regarded as being in opposition. To be sure, the issue would require a much deeper analysis, which I cannot do here.

2. Troubles with representationalism: a case study

In his *Origins of objectivity* (Burge 2010; see also Burge 2005), Tyler Burge has put forward one of the most influential accounts of perception. It is a view in which

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

⁴ Searle (2015) suggests that perceptual experiences are *presentations*, rather than representations of the world. Although this correction could seem important (cf. section 2 *infra*), there is no reason to regard Searle’s theory as a third position in the field, since it is a standard representational theory under all other aspects.

direct realism, representationalism and empirical results from computational psychology are admirably combined. Yet, as I am going to show, the overall result faces some difficulties. Or, at any rate, direct realism is not easily vindicated.

Let me start with what I take to be the core of Burge's picture: the principle of proximality, 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.

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 proximality⁵ turns out to be inconsistent with relational direct realism, as it should be expected, since Burge is a representationalist. Indeed Burge takes the truth of the principle as a *reductio* of the disjunctive theory, insofar as science of perception depends on proximality, and so the disjunctive theory turns out to be inconsistent with science⁶. We will go back on this point in the last section, when we will discuss relationalism.

Now, it is well known that Burge is nothing less than the father of externalism in philosophy of mind (Burge 1979; for the specific case of perception, see Burge

⁵ As Campbell (2010) points out, perhaps there is a conspicuous idealization in the proximality principle. However, the following "statistical" reformulation could be accepted: in an ordinary context, with nothing of unusual going on, sameness of proximal stimulus in that context is fairly highly correlated with sameness of conscious experience.

⁶ Here Burge has in his mind computational psychology.

1986). This raises the first problem, because the principle of proximality fits better with the internalist point of view. How can we reconcile Burge's commitment to the principle of proximality with his avowal of externalism?

First of all, let me clarify why I said that the principle of proximality fits better with internalism. The reason is that, according to the principle, any external factor relevant to a perceptual state can be "screened off", so that what determines the content of a perceptual experience is a collection of internal factors after all. In other words, externalism about perceptual content requires that the content systematically co-varies with changes in the environment; but this cannot be the case if the principle of proximality is true, since it is possible that, notwithstanding a difference in external conditions (two distinct objects), perceptual content remains the same (and vice-versa).

Arguably, two replies are available to Burge. Let me first consider a reply that Burge probably would not endorse. The idea is that one thing is the experience and another thing is the content. The "type of perceptual state" mentioned in the principle of proximality is not the content: it is rather the experience itself, or what is usually called the "phenomenal character" of the experience. Therefore content is not affected by the proximality principle, which only concerns the phenomenal character. This view is, however, hardly perspicuous, because it makes perceptual content something detached and independent from phenomenal character. After all, perceptual content is the way the world is given to the subject, so how on earth it might be that external factors are relevant to the content but not to the experience? If perceptual content is the way the world is given to the subject, it cannot be the case that it is not determined by the proximal stimulus. If one wants to take this route, content turns out to be a sort of idle wheel: it is a quite abstract entity whose relation with the notion of what one seems to perceive is far from being clear. On the contrary, in the over-mentioned case of the identical cars, it seems reasonable to say that the content and the phenomenal character are identical too.

The second reply is based on Burge's claim that the representational content of perceptual states is partly individuated in terms of what *causes* these states, i.e., external objects. In fact, the existence of the object is required for the existence of perceptual content: the latter depends existentially of its distal cause. This can be *prima facie* interpreted in two ways: Either it means that the representational content can be *described* (and usually is described) in terms of external objects (and their properties), or it means that external objects are *part* of the representational content.

Neither interpretation, however, fits well with Burge's overall theory. The former concedes too much to the objector: in this formulation externalism is not a metaphysical thesis and has no modal import. Externalism turns out to be a very weak thesis, against Burge's view of the matter (see e.g. Burge 1986). The latter amounts to an endorsement of the relational version of representationalism, which he clearly dismisses. What Burge needs is a third interpretation, according to which the existential dependence of perceptual content from the object is a genuinely metaphysical thesis, which, at the same time, does not involve relationalism. It is not clear to me whether there is room for such a position. Be that as it may, it must be conceded that the principle of proximity is more "at home" with internalism.

What are, if any, the consequences of this difficulty for Burge's direct-realist view? First of all, 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, but the first point is hardly compatible with direct realism. It suggests, in fact, 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*.

Therefore Burge's formulation of direct realism is not entirely perspicuous. It is not clear that he is able to deal with the well known difficulty faced by anyone 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.

Faced to this problem, we can be tempted to accept Searle's proposal (see note 4 above) that perception is *presentational*, rather than representational. Actually, this is a merely linguistic amendment: both Burge and Searle take perceptual content as the way the object is given. However, there is in Searle a good suggestion, shared by most representationalists: interpreting the idea that the content of perceptual experience is the way the object is given as a form of indirect realism is the result of a confusion either between perceiving the object and perceiving the experience itself,

or between perceiving the object and perceiving the content. Instead, we perceive the object having an experience –the experience (re)presents the object–, without being in a relation with the experience (unless we reflect on it, but this is not a perceptual state): we are in relation with the object. In other words, to put it in a phrase, we do not perceive the way the object is given to us; rather, we perceive the object in a certain way. And what happens in our head determines the way the object is given, not *what* object is given.

This seems to be enough to save direct realism. Yet, as we are going to see in the following section, there certainly is a more linear way to vindicate it.

3. The relational view (and its shortcomings)

As I have said several times in this article, direct realism requires that what is given in the experience is the real object. According to disjunctivists, only relationalism allows escaping what Zucca (2015) calls the “detachment problem”, i.e., the impression that experience is “disconnected” from the world. Indeed, if perceptual experiences are representations, how can we still defend the idea that what is given in the experience is the object? Representations are not world-involving; they are at most world-dependent.

The relationalist claim, however, faces immediately a difficulty. How on earth a real object can be part of a mental state? Experience is something internal to the subject. Therefore, whoever wants to be a relationalist must give a non-internal account of experience. He must explain how experience can be outside of the mind.

A good starting point might be subjective evidence: when we have a perceptual experience, something is given to us, but is not given as something mental, or internal (i.e., in the head), whatever this exactly means. It is given as being outside there. And if we try to reflect on our own experience, we are unable to find something “inside us”; we still find the object with its properties, which presents itself as being outside there (cf. the notion of transparency of experience, §1 above). Under this aspect, there is a deep phenomenal difference between propositional thought and perception. And arguably there is also a difference, though less dramatic, between imagery and perception.

Of course, phenomenology is not 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, 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 different⁷, and it is this difference that explains phenomenal differences. To put it shortly, there is more information in perception, creating the impression of reality.

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 simply presents the world, without making use of images or any other kinds of representation. 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. By contrast, perception does not need vehicles (at the personal level).

Both explanations state that there are different processes involved in thought and perception, but they are crucially different under one aspect: Explanation 1 implies indirect realism, since what I perceive is an image created by the mind/brain, whereas Explanation 2 involves 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.

⁷ More 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.

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 absurd⁸. To put it in a nutshell: *thought is 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 metaphysical 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).

Clearly this argument is not enough to persuade representationalists that experience is outside the head, because of the strong intuition that experience –what seems to us to perceive– depends on *internal* operations. And I agree: there is something really puzzling in the conjunctive claim that neural processes underlying experience are internal but experience itself is not⁹. The first step to take for not being puzzled is to separate totally the two levels: one thing is what happens in the head when we have a perceptual experience; quite another thing is the experience itself (more on this below).

⁸ 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.

⁹ Clearly, representationalists do not think that direct realism requires paying a so high price. They think that a mental state (in the head) can directly present an external object. We saw in the second section why this is unconvincing to a certain extent: it is an unstable position, constantly open to the threat of collapsing on indirect realism.

However, there are still at least two major objections that can be made to relationalism and the related thesis of the external character of experience. The first objection is a variation on the evergreen theme of the argument from hallucination/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. The second objection is that the relational account is in conflict with cognitive science (specifically, with the computational theory of vision).

Although there are familiar answers (set out long since in Austin 1962) to the first objection, I take it as the most harmful and I think that the following, tentative reply is still open to some criticisms. In the first place, the answer to the argument from hallucination is that there is no reason to take the phenomenological indiscriminability as a criterion for identity. A genuine perception and a hallucination are two different kinds of mental state even if they have a common factor. However, this answer does not address the real point: if it is possible that hallucination and perception are *phenomenally* identical, this seems to be a good reason to believe that the phenomenal character of experience, even in the genuinely perceptual case, is fully determined by internal facts –external facts are screened off. And this entails, of course, that relationalism is false: the object plays no direct role in perceptual experience. In other words, the problem is precisely the common factor, the *phenomenological* identity or indiscriminability¹⁰.

Many words have been spent on this theme (see e.g. Martin 2004; Sturgeon 2006; Fish 2009, just to mention a few), but I am forced to be very brief, so I just give a sketch of what seems to me the picture of the situation. The relationalist could argue that hallucination is a perceptual-like kind of *thought*: its etiology and its causal role are different from perception. Hence, the phenomenal character of hallucination is similar to that one of imagery, not to that one of perception¹¹. Admittedly, however, since the phenomenal identity between a genuine perceptual state and a hallucination is a metaphysical possibility –a sort of stipulation–, it is not something that we can rule out by argument. It must be acknowledged that relationalism has troubles to face this objection.

¹⁰ I will not discuss here the argument to the effect that phenomenological indiscriminability does not imply phenomenological identity, even if my proposal could, in a certain sense, be seen as a variation of this strategy.

¹¹ According to Fish (2009) hallucination has not a phenomenal character (so that there is no quest of common factor), but this seems to me too strong.

As to the second 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 proximity principle. What does it mean that science conforms to the proximity 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 proximity: 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 explanations¹².

What I am suggesting is therefore that direct realism is best warranted by 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 influential neuroscientist Chris Frith: «my mind can have no knowledge about the

¹² A similar argument based on the (relative) independency of personal states from subpersonal states can be found in Nanay (2015) and McDowell (1994).

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)¹³. 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 whole agent 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.

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.

¹³ 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.

4. Conclusion

I have argued that direct realism is the best way to warrant realism about the existence of the external world and that direct realism is best accounted for by relationalism. However, relationalism faces a few objections, both naïve and technical. I tried to show how to deal with a couple of these objections, but I think that the reply to the problem raised by the argument from hallucination is not completely satisfactory.

For this reason, it seems to me that direct realism is best characterized as a constraint on theories of perception, rather than as a substantive thesis that can be demonstrated.

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.

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