# Topic 7:  Perceptual Knowledge of the External World

## Part 2:  Direct Realism Versus Indirect Realism

## Introduction: Three Theses

There are at least three different concepts that have been used in drawing the distinction between direct realism and indirect realism (or the representative theory of perception).  These concepts are as follows:

(1) The concept of noninferentially justified belief, or noninferential knowledge;

(2) The concept of direct awareness (in Michael Huemer's sense);

(3) The concept of immediate objects of acquaintance, or immediate objects of perception (in Frank Jackson's sense).

## 1.  Noninferentially Justified Belief

The notion of inference here calls for some discussion, since it refers to a causal connection between beliefs, or thoughts, that need not be a conscious process, and some philosophers have rejected that idea.  But I think it can be shown that one makes such unconscious inferences very frequently indeed.

In any case, given that concept of inference, together with the concept of justification, one can define the idea of a belief that is justified, but that has not been inferred from other justified beliefs – or, at least, which would be justified even if it were not so inferred.  The distinction between direct realism and indirect realism can then be drawn as follows:

Direct realism is the view that at least some beliefs about physical objects or states of affairs can be noninferentially justified.

Indirect realism (or the representative theory of perception) is the view beliefs about physical objects or states of affairs can be inferentially justified, but none can be noninferentially justified.

## 2.  Michael Huemer's Concept of Direct Awareness

Michael Huemer offers the following definition of direct realism:

"My direct realism embodies two main theses:  first, the thesis that perception is direct awareness of external reality; second the thesis that we have noninferential knowledge of the external world as a result of perception."  (*SVP*, 51)

Let us consider, then, how the first thesis is to be understood.

### 2.1 The Concept of Awareness

(1) **Awareness** is a genuine **relation**, so that, necessarily, if A is aware of x, then x exists, and if A is aware of x, and x = y, then A is aware of y.

(2) Awareness is a **mental state**, and of a type that involves **apprehension**

(3) A crucial part of the concept of **apprehension** is the concept of **representational content**.

## 2.2 The Concept of Apprehension

An apprehension is an **assertive**, **mental**, **representation**. That is to say, it is (1) a **mental** state that, in addition to (2) **representing** a possible state of affairs, (3) **asserts** that the possible state of affairs in question is **actual**. (*SVP*, 53)

"In sum, we can define an apprehension as an assertive mental representation." (*SVP*, 54)

## 2.3 The Definition of Awareness

"To summarize the conditions required for awareness:

S is aware of *x* if and only if

i.   *S* has an assertive mental representation (an apprehension)

ii.  *x* exists and at least roughly satisfies the content of that representation

and

iii. it is not accidental (not due to chance) that the content of the representation is satisfied." (*SVP*, 55)

**Comments:  Awareness and Qualia**

(1) Notice that, as awareness has just been defined, it is not necessary that awareness involve any qualia.

(2) Perception as analyzed by David Armstrong satisfies, then, the analysis of awareness that Mike Huemer has offered.

(3) It would be natural to introduce a causal relation between *x* and some state of *S* in defining the concept of *S*'s being aware of *x*. Mike Huemer does not do so, and as a result one might wonder whether his account is adequate. For suppose that one is aware of *x*, in the sense just defined, and suppose then that *y* is a perfect copy of *x*. It would seem to follow that one is also aware of *y*. But is this right?

Another case to consider is one where a computer causes the existence both of a vase and of a holographic image of a vase. Doesn't it then follow, on the above analysis, that a person who sees the holographic image is **aware of the vase**?

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## 2.4 Direct Awareness Versus Indirect Awareness

Mike defines this distinction as follows:

"In general, you are indirectly aware of *x* if you are aware of *x*, but your awareness of *x* is based upon your awareness of something else. You are aware of *x* directly if you are aware of *x*, and your awareness of *x* is *not* based upon your awareness of anything else." (*SVP*, 55)

What is the **based upon** relation?

Mike's answer is as follows:

(1) The based upon relation is **causal**: if your awareness of $x$ is based upon your awareness of $y$, then your awareness of $x$ is caused by your awareness of $y$.

(2) The relation is also a **logical** one: the content of the second assertive mental representation **supports** (or, at least, **appears to you to support**) the content of the first assertive mental representation.

(3) These first two features are connected: the one assertive mental representation causes the other **because** you believe that the former assertive mental representation supports the latter belief.

The **based upon** relation functions, then, to expand the scope of our awareness.

## 2.5 A Second Way of Drawing the Distinction

Mike Huemer defines direct realism as involving two theses, the one concerned with direct awareness, and the other with noninferential knowledge, or noninferentially justified belief. One could, however, define the distinction between direct realism and indirect realism using only the concept of direct awareness, as Mike has defined it:

Direct realism is the view that one can be directly aware of physical states of affairs, where direct awareness of something involves (1) an assertive mental representation that is (2) roughly satisfied, and (3) not merely accidentally, by the thing in question, and where the awareness is not based upon awareness of anything else.

Indirect realism is the view that one can never be directly aware of physical states of affairs, but that one can be aware of one's experiences, and aspects of those experiences, involving either qualitative properties or relations between qualitative properties.

## 3. Frank Jackson's Concept of Immediate Objects of Acquaintance, or Immediate Objects of Perception

Frank Jackson's account of the distinction between direct realism and indirect realism (or the representative theory of perception), and the concept of immediate objects of perception upon which the distinction is based, is set out by him in his book, *Perception: A Representative Theory*.

## 3.1 Frank Jackson's Definition of the Representative Theory of Perception

"In this book I argue that the correct philosophical theory of perception is a representative one. By such a theory, I mean one that holds

(i) that the immediate objects of (visual) perception are always mental;

(ii) that there are objects, variously called external, material or physical, which are independent of the existence of sentient creatures;

(iii) that these objects have only the primary qualities;

    (iv)    to (visually) perceive a material object is to be in a certain kind of perceptual state as a causal result of the action of that object.

(The restriction to visual perception – seeing – is to be understood throughout.)"  (1)

**Comment**

    Notice that Jackson's definition does not involve either the idea of **knowledge** (or of justified belief), or the idea of **inference**.

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## 3.2  Jackson's Account of the Distinction between Mediate and Immediate Objects of Perception

    Jackson's analysis of the distinction between mediate and immediate objects of perception is as follows:

    "Now for our definition: *X* is a *mediate object of (visual) perception* (for *S* at *t*) iff *S* sees *x* at *t*, and there is a *y* such that ($x \neq y$ and) *S* sees *x* in virtue of seeing *y*.  An *immediate object of perception* is one that is not mediate; and we can define the relation of *immediately perceiving* thus: *S* immediately perceives *x* at *t* iff *x* is an immediate object of perception for *S* at *t* (as just defined)."  (19-20)

    Crucial to this account of the distinction is the **in virtue of** relation.  Jackson offers the following account of this relation:

    "We are now able to spell out *in virtue of* sufficiently for present purposes. An *A* is *F* in virtue of a *B* being *F* if the application of '– is *F*' to an *A* is definable in terms of its application to a *B*, and a relation, *R*, between *A*s and *B*s, but not conversely.  This gives us an account for the indefinite case.  We obtain an account for the definite case as follows: *This A* is *F* in virtue of *this B* being *F* if (i) an *A* is *F* in virtue of a *B* being *F* (as just defined), and (ii) this *A* and this *B* are *F*, and (iii) this *A* and this *B* bear *R* to each other."  (18)

    One of the illustrations of the 'in virtue of' relation that Jackson offers is as follows:

(a) "I live in Australia" can be analyzed in terms "I live in X, and X is a part of Australia".

(b) But "I live in X" cannot be analyzed in terms "I live in Australia, and X is a part of Australia".

This illustration is, I think, unsound, for reasons that will emerge below.

## 4.  Discussion of Jackson's Account of the Concept of Immediate Objects of Perception

    Here I want to offer some sound illustrations of concepts that will enter into **in virtue of** relations.

### 4.1 Color

**Tropes, or Instances of Properties**

(1) Rather than starting from the idea of an object's having a color, let's start from the idea of **tropes of some color type,** or the idea of **an instance of some color property** – say, redness. When we do that, the fundamental form of expression here will be along the lines of

$$`R_1x'$$

- where this says that $x$ **is** an instance of redness, or a trope of the redness variety.

**Expanses**

(2) We can now define **what it is for an expanse to be red**, which I will symbolize by '$R_2x$':

'$R_2x$' is true if and only if $x$ is an expanse, and for every point $y$ in $x$, there is a trope $t$ such that (1) $t$ is located at point $y$, and (2) $R_1t$

**Opaque, Three-Dimensional Objects**

(3) We can then define **what it is for an opaque, three-dimensional object to be red (all over)**, which I will symbolize by '$R_3x$':

'$R_3x$' is true if and only if $x$ is an opaque, three-dimensional object, and there is a expanse $y$ that consists of all of the exterior points of object x, and $R_2y$.

Given these definitions, together with Jackson's account of the **in virtue of** relation, it follows that

(1) An opaque, three-dimensional object is red$_3$ in virtue of its exterior surface's being an expanse that is red$_2$.

(2) An expanse is red$_2$ in virtue of there being, at every point of the expanse, a property-instance of the red$_1$ variety.

**Comments**

1. In the definition of the **in virtue of** relation quoted above, Jackson uses **the same predicate** when he says, for example, that an $A$ is $F$ in virtue of a $B$ being $F$. But if these 'in virtue of' relations are supposed to hold in virtue of the fact that what it is for an $A$ to be $F$ can be analyzed in terms of what it is for a $B$ to be $F$, then the same predicate, F, should **not** be used in both places.

2. Jackson's car color/body color case is just an instance of the more general relation between the color$_3$ of an object and the color$_2$ of its exterior surface.

## 4.2 Seeing and Sensing

Before proceeding with this second illustration of the 'in virtue of' relation, we need to consider what seem to me to be two problems with Jackson's discussion of perception. One is that he wants to use the same term "sees" to speak both of seeing material objects and of seeing sense-data, and there is a serious question

whether one doesn't need different terms.  The other is that in discussing perception, Jackson formulates things in terms of the two options of seeing objects versus seeing that, and I think that this leaves out a crucial form of seeing.

## 4.2.1 Seeing Armstrongian States of Affairs

To begin with the second of these, I want to suggest that it is a mistake to formulate questions concerning perception in terms only of the following two options:

(1) Seeing an object;

(2) Seeing that.

For the preceding treatment of color – which brought in instances of properties – suggests that there is a third, and more fundamental "seeing" locution, namely:

(3) Seeing an instance of a property.

But even adding this third type of "seeing" relation does not give one everything that one needs, since one can also see different color-property-instances, or tropes, standing in **spatial relations** to one another.  So one needs to generalize from the case of seeing instances of a property to seeing **states of affairs** where the things related are property-instances:

(4) Seeing (Armstrongian) states of affairs.

## 4.2.2 Seeing versus Sensing

In the preceding sub-section, I have, for simplicity, formulated things in terms of the term "seeing".  It may very well be, however, that one really needs to think in terms of two different relations – seeing versus sensing – where the latter term is a label for the idea of **direct acquaintance**, and where (1) direct acquaintance is a relation in which one can stand to instances of properties (and relations) involved in purely internal, mental states of affairs, and (2) direct acquaintance with different properties (or relations) enables one to know various truths about different **relations of resemblance**, about the extent to which different properties (or relations) are **similar to one another**.

Which terms will be the appropriate ones depends upon one's views on the epistemology of perception.  So in what follows I shall, for purposes of illustration, formulate definitions that would, I think, be appropriate given, first, a manifest image version of direct realism, and secondly, two variants of an indirect realist view.

## 4.2.3 Seeing on a Manifest Image Version of Direct Realism

### 1.  Seeing Instances of Properties

First, then, we can introduce the expression '$S_1a(Px)$' to mean that $a$ sees$_1$ $x$'s having property $P$.

### 2. Seeing Expanses

We can then define what it is to see an expanse, which I will symbolize by '$S_2ax$':

**'$S_2ax$' is true if and only if $x$ is an expanse, and for every point $y$ in $x$, there is some state of affairs of the form $z$'s having property $P$, for some property $P$, such that (1) $z$ is located at point $y$, and (2) $S_1a(Pz)$**

### 3. Seeing Objects

Finally, we can then define what it is to see an object. Using '$S_3ax$' to symbolize this, we can define this notion as follows:

**'$S_3ax$' is true if and only if there is a $y$ such that (1) $y$ is an expanse, (2) $y$ is a part of $x$, and (3) $S_2ay$**

The first of these definitions reflects the idea, first, that property-instances are, on the manifest image view, immediate objects of perception, and, second, that it is appropriate to talk of seeing in such a case since those property-instances are properties of parts of external objects. It is then also true that the expanses in question are parts of external objects, so once again it is appropriate to talk of seeing those expanses.

## 4.2.4 Seeing on a Jackson-style Indirect Realist View

### 1. <u>Seeing</u> Instances of Properties

First, then, we can introduce the expression **'$S_1a(Px)$'** to mean that $a$ sees$_1$ $x$'s having property $P$.

### 2. <u>Seeing</u> Non-Physical Expanses

We can then define what it is to see a non-physical expanse, which I will symbolize by '$S_2ax$':

**'$S_2ax$' is true if and only if $x$ is an expanse, and for every point $y$ in $x$, there is some state of affairs of the form $z$'s having property $P$, for some property $P$, such that (1) $z$ is located at point $y$, and (2) $S_1a(Pz)$**

### 3. Seeing Physical Expanses

Thirdly, we can then define what it is to see a physical expanse. Using '$S_3ax$' to symbolize this, we can define this notion as follows:

**'$S_3ax$' is true if and only if there is a $y$ such that (1) $y$ is a non-physical expanse, (2) $y$ stands in an appropriate causal relation to $x$, and (3) $S_2ay$.**

### 4. Seeing Objects

Finally, we can then define what it is to see an object. Using '$S_4ax$' to symbolize this, we can define this notion as follows:

**'$S_4ax$' is true if and only if there is a $y$ such that (1) $y$ is a physical expanse, (2) $y$ is a part of $x$, and (3) $S_3ay$**

All four definitions are formulated in terms of abbreviations of the term "see", to reflect Jackson's view that it is perfectly appropriate to speak of seeing sense data.

## 4.2.5 Seeing/Sensing on a More Traditional Indirect Realist View

### 1. <u>Sensing</u> Instances of Properties

First, then, we can introduce the expression '$S_1a(Px)$' to mean that $a$ senses $x$'s having property $P$.

### 2. <u>Sensing</u> Non-Physical Expanses

We can then define what it is to sense a non-physical expanse, which I will symbolize by '$S_2ax$':

'$S_2ax$' is true if and only if $x$ is an expanse, and for every point $y$ in $x$, there is some state of affairs of the form $z$'s having property $P$, for some property $P$, such that (1) $z$ is located at point $y$, and (2) $S_1a(Pz)$

### 3. Seeing Physical Expanses

Thirdly, we can then define what it is to see a physical expanse. Using '$S_3ax$' to symbolize this, we can define this notion as follows:

'$S_3ax$' is true if and only if there is a $y$ such that (1) $y$ is a non-physical expanse, (2) $y$ stands in an appropriate causal relation to $x$, and (3) $S_2ay$.

### 4. Seeing Objects

Finally, we can then define what it is to see an object. Using '$S_4ax$' to symbolize this, we can define this notion as follows:

'$S_4ax$' is true if and only if there is a $y$ such that (1) $y$ is a physical expanse, (2) $y$ is a part of $x$, and (3) $S_3ay$

The first and second of these definitions are formulated in terms of **sensing**, reflecting the view that perception in general, and seeing in particular, are to be given a causal analysis, and, therefore, that perceptual terms cannot be applied to the case of properties/expanses of properties that are parts of purely mental states.

## 4.3 Seeing/Sensing and the "In Virtue of" Relations

In the case of the definitions associated with the manifest image version of direct realism, those definitions, together with Jackson's account of the **in virtue of** relation, will entail:

(1) One sees$_3$ a material object in virtue of seeing$_2$ an expanse that is part of the object's exterior surface.

(2) One sees$_2$ an expanse in virtue of seeing$_1$ property-instances that are located at every point of that expanse.

In the case of the definitions associated with the Jackson-style formulation of indirect realism, those definitions, together with Jackson's account of the **in virtue of** relation, will entail:

(1) One sees$_4$ a material object in virtue of seeing$_3$ a physical expanse that is part of the object's exterior surface.

(2) One sees$_3$ a physical expanse in virtue of seeing$_2$ a non-physical expanse that is causally related to the physical expanse.

(3) One sees$_2$ a non-physical expanse in virtue of seeing$_1$ property-instances that are located at every point of that expanse.

In the case of the definitions associated with the more traditional formulation of indirect realism, those definitions, together with Jackson's account of the **in virtue of** relation, will entail:

(1) One sees$_4$ a material object in virtue of seeing$_3$ a physical expanse that is part of the object's exterior surface.

(2) One sees$_3$ a physical expanse in virtue of sensing$_2$ a non-physical expanse that is causally related to the physical expanse.

(3) One senses$_2$ a non-physical expanse in virtue of sensing$_1$ property-instances that are located at every point of that expanse.

## 5.  The Unsound Illustration

1.  In the case of the sound illustrations, one can see that there are, for example, different senses of "red" involved when one talks of a property-instance as being red, of an expanse as being red, and of an object as being red, and one can offer a sequence of definitions relating the different senses.  Similarly, in the case of "seeing"/"sensing", one can also see that there are different senses involved that can be connected via definitions.

2.  This is not so in the case of "living in": the relation involved in the case of living in Melbourne is no different from the relation involved in living in Australia.  The only difference is with regard to the relata, and if it is suggested that one can distinguish between a living-in-a-city relation in which one might stand to Melbourne and a living-in-a-country relation in which one might stand to Australia, the answer is that neither of those relations is a basic relation, since the living-in-a-city relation, for example, can be analyzed as 'S lives in X and X is a city'.

## 6.  Some Comments on Jackson's Way of Formulating the Indirect Realist View

1. Near the end of Chapter 1 of his book *Perception: A Representative View*, Jackson characterizes what he is doing here as follows:

"The view being advanced here is an *analytical expansion* view, not a *two meanings* one."  (27-28)

Jackson also says, at that point, that it is **not** the case that "we see material objects in a different sense from that in which we see the immediate objects . . ."  (28)

2.  It is not clear why this "**analytical expansion**" view is not a **two-meanings** view, since what it is to see a physical object is, in effect, being defined in terms of what it is to see what are, on Jackson's view, sense data.

3. If the basic idea of seeing is the one which applies in the case of the immediate objects of perception, then, given Jackson's formulation of indirect realism, the basic idea of seeing is one that applies, as a matter of fact, to sense data.  But, then, when one extends the concept of seeing to physical objects, one has to bring the idea of causation into the concept.  So once again, it certainly looks as if one has **at least two** distinct senses of seeing.

4.  Moreover, when the definitions are set out that ground the relevant 'in virtue of' relations, then, as we have just seen, it becomes clear that the term "see" has different meanings when applied to **physical objects**, **physical expanse**s, **mental expanses**, and **mental properties**.

5.  The idea that the basic application of the term "sees" is to mental objects seems problematic. But perhaps it can be argued that the objection that perception is to be analyzed causally arises from focusing only on the case of mediate perception.  Or perhaps Jackson can appeal to the manifest image version of direct realism to argue that the property-instances that we see on his view are precisely the property-instances that someone who accepts the manifest image version of direct realism claims we see.  The only difference is that on Jackson's view they are no longer assigned a mistaken location.

6. So Jackson's terminology is, perhaps, not as clearly and obviously unsound as it first appeared.  If Jackson can sustain the view that he is using the term "see" with its ordinary sense, then talk about seeing sense data will be in principle legitimate. Otherwise, one will need to shift to traditional technical terms or expressions such as "sensing", or "being directly acquainted with".