# Perception, Realism and Materialism

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# Contents

# Introduction

We live in a world of three dimensional material objects which exist independently of us. Our access to this world is through sense perception. For the visually sighted, visual perception is perhaps the most important source of information about the world in which we live. Human beings are themselves material objects amongst other material objects but also possess consciousness. Consciousness is also possessed in some form by at least some other animals. Much if not all the information we receive about the world through sense perception is consciously received. Conscious perception is also compatible with a broadly materialist ontology. This last view may be rejected by many theists who form the majority of the world's population. Nonetheless it is widely held amongst many secular intellectuals who believe that the alternative is unscientific and anti-naturalistic.

If the propositions above were raised with most people, I think assent to almost all, if not all, these propositions would be forthcoming. These propositions form the basic common sense view of our general situation in the world. Philosophical theorizing about perception and the world we think it gives us knowledge of has to address these basic beliefs about the nature of our situation.

There are broadly three differing philosophical theories of sense perception historically - the sense datum theory, representationalism and what has recently become known as relational direct realism or disjunctivism. The sense datum theory is the most counter-intuitive in positing non-physical sense data as the immediate objects of perception, as opposed to material objects. Representationalism claims that our perceptions represent the material world. Relational direct realism says that material objects themselves are present in

perceptual experience. It is perhaps the closest to the common sense position and as such is also sometimes called naïve realism.

Recently, Howard Robinson has drawn a very helpful contrast between what he calls phenomenological direct realism (PDR) and semantic direct realism (SDR).[1] The former is defined by Robinson as follows:

"PDR is the theory that direct realism consists in unmediated awareness of the external object in the form of unmediated awareness of its relevant properties".[2]

As such, PDR is the view that perception, when veridical, puts us directly into contact with material objects and the properties intrinsic to them which we believe nonetheless exist independently of our perceptions themselves. Relational direct realism seems to make this a fundamental feature of its theory by contrast with the other two theories. However, Robinson believes that this view is philosophically unsustainable, that only semantic direct realism is coherent and phenomenological direct realism has to be rejected.

Semantic direct realism is defined by Robinson as follows:

"SDR is the theory that perceptual experience, in human and many animals, enshrines what one might call a judgment about external objects. If you do not like the word 'judgement' when applied to animals (perhaps because one might think judgement is something only available to concept-using animals with a language), or of neat perception itself, you can say it involves information about external objects. It is a direct realist theory because the judgment or information encapsulated in the experience concerns a putative external object".[3]



[1] Robinson, Howard: "Semantic Direct Realism", paper delivered to the Joint CEU/Rutgers Conference on the Philosophy of Mind, Central European University, January 2017
[2] Robinson, Howard: "Semantic Direct Realism", p2
[3] Robinson, Howard: "Semantic Direct Realism", p2

To develop this a little further, SDR seems to be the view that what we have taken to be the immediate objects and properties of perception as being independent of our perceptual experience are not in fact independent but are features of that experience itself. However, those features enable us to think about, judge, form beliefs about, etc, a world that may be independent of our experience and think about it in a way in which there is no mediation between the thought and the world. We therefore think about it directly.

I argue in this thesis that semantic direct realism should be rejected, that the sense datum theory is only compatible with a strongly counter-intuitive metaphysics although that does not in and of itself make it untrue, that representationalism also fails to deliver the kind of realism that is deeply embedded in our common sense and that only relational direct realism will do this.

However, I also argue that phenomenological direct realism only makes sense on the basis of features which themselves seem prima facie problematic for a broadly materialist ontology. I do not resolve these issues but claim that, without resolution, the broadly materialist ontology lacks complete coherence.

# Chapter one: The Sense Datum Theory

## Phenomenological direct realism (PDR)

Phenomenological direct realism (or PDR) can be defined as the idea that the intrinsic properties of objects that are themselves independent of perceptual experience enter into perceptual experience without mediation. By doing so, the objects themselves enter perceptual experience without mediation, other than through their intrinsic properties.

Issues may be raised about what is meant by intrinsic. One contrast here would be between intrinsic and so-called "Cambridge" properties. The latter are properties which may be true of an object in a certain sense but have become true and may cease to be true not through any change in the object itself. So I may come to admire Richard Strauss's opera Der Rosenkavalier but that change involves no change in the score of the opera. On the other hand, if an object changes its colour or its shape, that would seem naturally to be understood as a change in the object rather than in a purely external relation to the object.

One might also ask what does the object and its properties "entering" a perceptual experience mean. By entering the perceptual experience I mean that the perceptual experience connects a person without further mediation to the experience-independent object and its intrinsic properties. So phenomenological direct realism is the view that when I see a red car, for example, the redness I am seeing is an intrinsic property of the car and, in seeing that redness and other intrinsic properties of the car such as its shape, I am seeing the car itself. This seems to me broadly in line with what common sense tells us our relationship to the world independent of our minds is.

Phenomenological direct realism need not imply the implausible thesis that in every case of perceptual experience, the properties experienced are intrinsic to the object we believe we are perceiving. Things may go wrong in various ways or conditions of perception may not be optimal and so at least some of the properties immediately experienced may not be attributable to the experience-independent object. But it seems that however much things go wrong or are not optimal, at least some of our perceptual experiences must be of the properties of objects intrinsic to those objects or we will lack any justification for claiming that our perceptual experience is directly of experience-independent objects and their properties.

## Five arguments against PDR

However there are at least five arguments which seem to imply that objects and their properties do not enter perceptual experience directly and that phenomenological direct realism is therefore not a true theory of our perceptual experience. These are the arguments from science, the time lag argument, the relativity of perception argument, the argument from illusion and the hallucination argument.[4]

The argument from science is that science and in particular fundamental physics posits entities to explain the nature of the world which do not include any of the properties we would normally claim directly to experience. The entities they posit are quantificational and dispositional. But the properties that we visually experience directly are qualitative and categorical. In particular, in visual experience, we are dependent on colour and colour variation in order to identify and individuate objects. And yet colour in physics is explained by light waves and their impact on the retina and then the optic nerve and then processes involving neural networks. It is assumed that one day we will find a complete explanation for

[4] Robinson, Howard: *Perception* (Routledge, 1994)

perception involving only these concepts or concepts similar to them as our science develops. Even if we do not reach a completed science, such a complete science is conceivable and in it there will be none of the qualities that seem to feature in our perceptual experience. Science is the best guide to the nature of the world that exists independent of our perceptual experience. Science therefore tells us that the objects and their properties that seem to feature in our perceptual experience are not as the world is in its intrinsic nature. That nature consists of quarks or strings or whatever, none of which feature in our perceptual experience directly. Therefore phenomenological direct realism must be false. Experience-independent objects and their intrinsic perceptual properties do not enter our experience directly. Those objects and their properties that make up the experience-independent world are a matter of theoretical inference.

The time lag argument takes a specific postulate of contemporary physics, that the speed of light is finite (at 186,000 miles per second). If the speed of light is finite, then when we see distant stars, they may not be as we see them now. Indeed they may even have ceased to exist. If the light which enabled us to see them left those objects say a million light years ago, there is no reason to believe they are now as they appear to be to us or even that they still exist. Therefore objects and their intrinsic properties that are a very long way away from us cannot be entering our perceptual experience directly if they no longer have those properties which we experience them as having or if they have ceased to exist altogether. But what applies to far distant objects, also applies to those nearest to us. The time lag may be very small, so small it is impossible to notice it, but it is still there. From this it can be concluded that no object and its intrinsic properties directly enter the perceptual experience itself.

The relativity of perception argument is that our perceptual experience always takes place from a particular place in space, from a particular angle, in particular observational conditions and in specific circumstances relating to the perceptual faculty such as the state of

the retina and the optic nerve and so on. To take the example of visual experience as the one that illustrates this relativity most dramatically, perceptual experience of objects will vary with the changing position of the object and the perceiver. In doing so, the colours featuring in the perceptual experience will themselves change. Indeed without such changes it is impossible to see how judgements of distance and our more general concetpion of space could develop. Although there are changes in the colours that feature directly in our experience, we do not necessarily attribute these changes to the objects themselves. Again, we would not be operating with our conception of space if we did always so attribute them. Moreover, even without movement either of the object or the perceiver, the colours we experience may change, for example as a result of a change in lighting conditions. So the colours we very often experience directly are not the colours we normally attribute to the object intrinsically. The problem then will be to identify on a principled basis perceptual experience which does present the intrinsic properties of the object and, although it is a further argument, it is claimed there is no such principled distinction intrinsic to experience itself which will allow us to do this.

The argument from illusion is an extension of the relativity argument. There are some cases of perceptual experience where we clearly are not seeing the objects of perception as they are in themselves. The paradigm case of such an illusion is the way a straight stick appears bent when partially immersed in water in a clear tank. We know the stick is straight. We may have seen it or touched it prior to immersion, but it now looks bent. This has been denied. It has been argued that it looks like a straight stick immersed in water.[5] This is implausible however. The illusion is only an illusion because the phenomenal appearance of the stick has changed. We may judge it still to be straight. Given a basic knowledge of common sense

[5] Austin, J.L: *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford University Press, 1962)

physics, we may be unlikely to think otherwise. But this is a judgement based on previous experience. The stick definitely looks bent in terms of its immediate appearance and we have an explanation of this from physics in terms of the effect of water on light waves.

The argument then proceeds that if we can have perfectly veridical seeming experiences which nonetheless turn out to be illusory, then how do we draw a principled distinction between the veridical and the illusory experiences in terms of the intrinsic features of those experiences. John Foster has given the example of a seemingly veridical experience of an object and its properties gradually giving way to a distorted and illusory experience. At what point may it be asked does the experience itself intrinsically change from one in which the intrinsic properties of the object are featured to one in which they are not.[6]

If the argument from illusion is an extension of the relativity argument, the argument from hallucination is an extension of the argument from illusion. In cases of illusion, we accept that at least some of the properties we are experiencing as of the object experienced are not in fact intrinsic to it. However, we still assume there is an object there to be perceived. In the case of hallucination we have properties in experience which seem to be of an object but there is no such object at all. The hallucination is only an hallucination if the perceptual experience is such that we seem to be seeing an object in the real world, if the perceptual experience seems veridical. But there is no such object. Again, there seems to be no intrinsic feature of an hallucinatory experience which will differentiate the hallucinatory from the veridical.



[6] Foster, John: *The Nature of Perception* (Oxford University Press, 2000)

## The causal argument

Howard Robinson has sought to reinforce the hallucination argument on the basis of what seem reasonable assumption about the relationship of the brain to perceptual experience.[7] No-one believes that in the world in which we live there isn't some dependency of experience on the brain. Physicalists nowadays sometimes posit an identity between states of the brain and certain perceptual experiences or supervenience on the brain where there can be no change at the level of experience without a change in the state of the brain. Even dualists will argue in favour of causal relationships between the brain and the mind such that if there is a change in the brain there will likely be a change in the mind's experiences, but more importantly if there is no change in brain state there will be no change in the mind. If we posit a certain brain state being at least correlated with a certain experiential state in a veridical case, then we can posit exactly the same brain state existing in a hallucinatory case. Indeed, although it is impossible for us to create such identical brain states at the moment, there seems no incoherence in the idea that neuroscience should not be capable of such advances in the future that identical brain states should be created in veridical and non-veridical, hallucinatory perceptual experiences. In such circumstances, it is reasonable to believe that exactly the same experience would be created in a subject through the manipulation of the brain as in a veridical case but in the absence of the object, thus making the experience a hallucination. But on the assumption we are making of same cause leading to the same effect, the conclusion can be reached that even in the veridical case, experience-independent objects and their properties do not enter the veridical experience because it is identical in nature to the hallucinatory experience where there are no such objects and their properties so to enter.



[7] Robinson, Howard: *Perception* (Routledge, 1994)

## The phenomenal principle and the spreading argument

The five arguments above may be taken cumulatively to be very strong arguments against phenomenological direct realism. There are two further arguments necessary however for us to reach a conclusion that the direct objects of perceptual experience are not experience-independent objects and their intrinsic properties but rather experience-dependent sense data. These are the phenomenal principle and the spreading argument.

The phenomenal principle may be stated as follows:

When someone is having a perceptual experience but it is not of the intrinsic properties of an object directly perceived, then there is nonetheless an object and its properties which are being directly perceived.[8]

This would imply that in all non-veridical cases where properties are being perceived which are not the properties of an experience-independent object, there is nonetheless an object which possesses those properties which is being perceived. In the absence of an experience-independent object, that object must be experience-dependent.

The spreading argument is as follows:

If in the non-veridical cases of perceptual experience, there is an experience-dependent object whose properties are being perceived, then such objects must be the direct objects of experience in the veridical cases too.[9]

Both of these arguments have been challenged. However there is an intuitive case in defence of each.



[8] Robinson, Howard: *Perception* (Routledge, 1994)
[9] Fish, William: *Perception, Hallucination and Illusion* (Oxford University Press, 2009)

The key issue in the case of the phenomenal principle is the fact that in cases of perceptual experience, properties are presented in experience. It is this presentational feature which is crucial to the argument. This is the difference between thinking about something and actually experiencing it. It would not be appropriate to enter fully into the debate about cognitive phenomenology but it seems clear without begging questions that we have to differentiate between thinking of an event and having a perceptual experience of an event. The difference is that in perceptual experience sensible properties must be present in the experience, whereas in thought, they do not have to be present (although they may be, for example when you are thinking about what you are seeing). When we have experiences of properties which are not properties of experience-independent objects as in illusions or hallucinations, it is a defining feature of these perceptual experiences that these perceptual experiences nonetheless have properties present in the experience, visually present in the form of colours, etc in visual experience. The phenomenal principle is an attempt to reflect that presentational aspect. When I experience an array of colours which purports to be a dagger before me, as opposed to me merely thinking this, there really is an array of colours concretely as opposed to abstractly before me in my experience. And that is enough, the phenomenal principle claims, to assert that where we seem to be seeing something, there is something we are seeing even when that something is not experience-independent as we may have thought it to be.

In the case of the spreading argument, it is clear that the time lag argument is itself already a general argument as all light takes time to travel, so any light entering the eye and the cognitive processing system occurs after it has left the object from which it came and therefore what is being seen in perceptual experience cannot be exactly how that object is now, only how it was some time before, even if that time might be very short. In the argument from science, there is also a generality built in. If all the entities posited by science are dispositional and no dispositional entities are present in experience, not least because

dispositional entities cannot be directly experienced, then no entities posited by science, which ultimately gives the complete explanation of the world independent of the mind, directly enter perceptual experience. As for the other three arguments, the spreading argument is that it is not possible to draw a principled distinction between veridical and non-veridical experience in terms of the intrinsic features of those experiences. Therefore if no such principled distinction can be drawn, phenomenological direct realism must be false in the case of veridical experiences because veridical experiences are such that they are not intrinsically different from non-veridical experiences where no intrinsic properties of experience-independent objects enter the experience itself.

## The privacy of sense data

The arguments thus far have led to the conclusion that the immediate objects of perceptual experience are in each and every case of perceptual experience not the intrinsic properties of experience-independent objects but rather experience-dependent objects and their intrinsic properties. Such objects have become known as sense data.[10] But what exactly are sense data?

As they are internal to the perceptual experience itself and experience-dependent and as they seem to be particulars, sense data might be reasonably assumed to be logically private objects. Such private objects have been taken to be the target of Wittgenstein's private language arguments. Although much of the discussion has been about pain as a paradigmatic logically private object, it's natural to assume that the arguments should also apply to sense data. There are two connected strands of argument which seem particularly relevant. The first is that if the shared meaning of words is acquired in at least some instances by ostensive

[10] The Sense Datum theory has fallen out of fashion in recent years. Notable philosophers who supported it in the 20th century included Bertrand Russell, G.E. Moore, C.D. Broad and H.H. Price. More recently John Foster and Howard Robinson have provided formidable critiques of direct realism and defences of the Sense Datum Theory.

definition and the object of that ostensive definition is logically private and therefore accessible in principle only to one mind or person, then no-one else can know what it is that the ostensive definition is referring to and cannot therefore learn the meaning of such terms. Language becomes logically private by virtue of the logically private objects which are the targets of ostensive definition of those terms and language thereby becomes unshareable. An unshareable language means that communication is impossible. We literally cannot understand one another. This might be taken as a reductio ad absurdum of the positing of sense data. If this is the consequence of positing them, then something must have gone wrong in the argument. For in our analysis of perceptual experience, it is a basic assumption that we can communicate. What we are doing is merely analysing what can be justified in terms of the underlying metaphysics.

However, what seems to be a modus ponens argument against logically private objects can also be a modus tollens argument against the conditions set for a shareable language. If a consequence of the private language argument is that we cannot share a language based on logically private objects, then, as we do so share such a language, the private language argument must be wrong. However, we achieve it, we do communicate and we seem to have no problem both referring to logically private objects and communicating about them.[11]

Peter Hacker has argued there is a further radical strand to the private language argument. It is not just or even that logically private objects make language unshareable, such a language can have no meaning even for the individual we suppose possesses it. Language depends on standards which constitute the difference between the correct and incorrect use of language and by extension the correct and incorrect application of concepts. That is because language use and concept application is subject to norms. Otherwise what seems correct will be correct

[11] Hacker, P.M.S: *Wittgenstein - Meaning and Mind* (Blackwell, 1990)

and then we cannot make sense of correctness at all.[12] For these standards to be established we need samples that are themselves independent of the experience of the person acquiring the language and which are repeatable. Only in such circumstances can language use and concept application be tested. The standard needs to have an independence such that use and application can be compared against it and it has to be repeatable so that comparisons can be repeated. Logically private objects fail these requirements of independence and repeatability. So there cannot be a logically private language based on logically private objects because it could not be understood by the person to whom we were trying to ascribe the private language.[13]

If the private language arguments are valid, it seems to be a consequence that we cannot be cut off from the publicly accessible, three dimensional material world that the five arguments were threatening to cut us off from. We cannot be so cut off because we conceptualise and communicate through language and it seems a condition of even possessing a language that we inhabit a world of publicly accessible objects with which we are in unmediated contact through perceptual experience and which can then constitute the samples that provide us with the standards necessary for coherent concept application.

However, the private language arguments do not seem conclusive. I noted above that the argument from incommunicability could be rejected. The basis of a rejection of both strands of the argument would be that the argument is essentially question-begging. If we grant that independent and repeatable samples are, in some sense, required to establish standards for language use and concept application, these will ultimately depend on our experiencing them as such. Provided our experience and our memories are so ordered that we seem to be in a

[12] Wittgenstein, Ludwig: *Philosophical Investigations, Revised Fourth Edition* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009
[13] Hacker, P.M.S: *Wittgenstein - Meaning and Mind* (Blackwell, 1990)

world of objects which have some independence of us and which are repeatable, it can be argued that will be enough.

It may be in part concerns about the private language arguments that prompted John Foster's analysis of the nature of sense data. Foster claimed that treating sense data as particulars which were nonetheless experience-dependent did not give sense data sufficient independence and objectivity to be sharable objects of communication. He posited rather that the direct objects of perception were concrete sensory universals. They were objects in the sense that they constituted the sensory objects of perceptual experience. But as universals they were not confined to that particular experience. They could be found in all similar experiences. This gave them an independence from individual experiences. Even if there were never to be another experience with this universal, there could have been.[14] The sharing of these universals would also be the basis on which communication could take place as the objects of perception are not confined to logically private particulars. They are instead universals which others can also experience. At worst then, communication would depend on inductive inference or argument to the best explanation as to which universals another person was referring to or which we assume they are experiencing, but there is no reason in principle why communication cannot take place on the basis of the perceptual experience of these concrete sensory universals.

The issues here are rather beyond the scope of this thesis to resolve. However, in response to Foster, it is not clear to me that it is possible to have a concrete perceptual experience understood in some sense as the perceptual experiencing of an object in which the object is not a particular. Insofar as it has properties, it will also exemplify certain universals and universals are certainly the kind of entity that are supposed to be intrinsically sharable. That

[14] Foster, John: *The Nature of Perception* (Oxford University Press, 2000)

is what distinguishes properties and universals from particulars. I am not sure therefore whether it is coherent not to posit logically private objects as the objects of perceptual experience on the basis of the five arguments above. To transpose for the moment to the common sense view of the world as one in which we have access to a publicly shared three dimensional world consisting at least in part of medium-sized dry goods, it doesn't seem to make sense of this world to posit it as consisting only of universals albeit concrete ones. Making it concrete seems to essentially involve particulars. I see no reason why that shouldn't apply to logically private objects too.

## Sense data and the problems of indeterminacy

This raises further questions however. Paul Snowdon has recently questioned the coherence of the sense datum theory. Firstly, he argues we are not compelled to accept the phenomenal principle and, if we don't, there is no reason to conclude that the object of any perceptual experience is a sense datum. Secondly, if we do posit such objects, we get into problems of indeterminacy which questions the objecthood of sense data.[15]

We have already seen reasons on the basis of the presentational nature of perceptual experience to support the phenomenal principle. These may not be conclusive but there needs to be some positive argument to explain or explain away the presentational nature of perceptual experience in the absence of experience-independent objects with intrinsic properties of the kind experienced.

The second argument raises the so-called "speckled hen" argument. If you see a speckled hen, there may be far too many speckles for one to judge the number in one look or even to count up. Nonetheless, we accept that there will be a specific number, whatever that is, if there is an actual speckled hen running about the courtyard. However, if there is no such hen

[15] Snowdon, Paul: "Sense Data" in Matthen, Mohan (ed): *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Perception* (Oxford University Press, 2015)

and all we are presented with is the sense data as of a speckled hen, what is the number of speckles the speckled hen actually has? This is not a question of vagueness leading to Sorites paradoxes. If there is a concrete speckled hen running around the courtyard, there may certainly be boundary problems as to what is a speckle and what isn't and when is a speckle one speckle rather than two speckles. The problem is rather about whether there is anything intrinsic to a speckled hen sense datum which would give one answer rather than another to the question how many. If there isn't, then it can be argued sense data just don't seem like objects as objects would have a definite number of speckles (once boundary conditions have been determined).

One way of dealing with this would be to bite the bullet and simply say there is a definite number of speckles in the sense datum but it may not be possible for us to judge how many. In other words, the sense datum will definitely have a definite number of speckles but it is judgement rather than experience which is lacking in definiteness. This is to reify sense data in a way that does not seem particularly plausible. Sense data were intended to be the objects of perceptual experience when their appearance is, so to speak, immediate and not subject in principle to further investigation as we take objects independent of experience to be.

The alternative approach would be to say that there is a mix up here between the nature of sense data and how the objects which we have assumed we were in direct contact with are constituted. Sense data are, for example, patches of colour in the visual field. There is no reason to suppose that such patches of colour lend themselves when considered as sense data to differentiation into specific speckles. They may and they may not. Of course in inferring from that immediate experience to material objects, such material objects are such that there has to be a definite answer to the question, notwithstanding problems of vagueness in the boundaries of our concepts. So the answer to the problem of the speckled hen is that sense

data should be treated on their own terms and not according to the logic of material objects. Sense data are not a kind of material object. They are sui generis.

## Reality lost and restored?

On the face of it then, there seem to be good arguments for the sense datum theory and some arguments critical of it do not seem decisive. However, it seems we are now in a rather difficult situation metaphysically. The direct objects of perceptual experience are not the material objects we took them to be but rather experience-dependent objects. The world we thought we were in now seems to be cut off from our experience, in which case how can we even know a world independent of our experience exists. If it exists, what sense can we make of it? Is there a material world beyond our experience, perhaps as science has described it, but if so what relationship does it bear to our perceptual experience which we thought to be the source of much of our knowledge of the world? We are, if anything, instinctive materialists rather than idealists and yet the sense datum theory points in the direction of idealism, a world entirely constituted by experiences and their immediate mind-dependent objects, thoughts and other propositional attitudes based upon those experiences and perhaps minds or persons at least in part constituted by those propositional attitudes and experiences. Bishop Berkeley, with whose immaterialism the theory above has some close affinities, believed he had come to save key aspects of the common sense view of the world rather than to bury them. But how is this to be done?

It was perhaps easier for philosophers to subscribe to the sense datum theory when it was assumed that meaning could in some sense be reduced to or analysed into actual and possible experiences. If when we refer to material objects all we mean by that is actual and possible sense experience, there is nothing metaphysically to worry about. Our conceptualisation of reality may now be on a sounder footing as a result of analysis but this is not a metaphysical

challenge to a previous metaphysical scheme because this is what we meant all along. That view inspired by logical positivism has long been abandoned. Contemporary supporters of the sense datum theory recognise that the sense datum theory does on the face of it present a metaphysical challenge to common sense and have sought to reconcile the theory with at least certain aspects of what has come to be known as the 'manifest image' of reality.[16] John Foster, for example argues that the metaphysical explanation for our situation is that God has so ordered our sensory experience that it is impossible for us not to believe the common sense theory (including of course phenomenological direct realism) even though philosophy shows this to be an incorrect theory of our experience.[17]

## The very concept of a mind-independent world

There is an argument that we couldn't have the concept of experience-independent objects and an experience-independent world if we didn't have experience of such objects and such a world. On the face of it, this might seem to be based on a rather simplistic empiricism in which concepts can only be acquired on the basis of experience of the same kind of thing. It might seem to have some purchase with some simpler concepts though. Whatever understanding we gain of what it is, say, for something to be red, it won't be the kind of understanding that we obtain when we actually have experience of red things and understand that that very colour is the colour of redness. This will be true however much scene setting there may have to be in terms of understanding what a colour is, etc. Moreover, if our experience is only of experience-dependent objects, how can we make the transition from them to experience-independent objects?

Howard Robinson has argued that we do not have to have experience directly of a mind-independent world in order to acquire the concept of an objective world existing

[16] Sellars, Wilfrid: *Science, Perception and Reality* (Routledge, 1963)
[17] Foster, John: *A World For Us* (Oxford University Press, 2008)

independently of our minds. This can be derived he argues from the constancy and coherence of our sense-experience, a view he attributes to David Hume.[18] Foster seems to be arguing something similar when he claims that our sensory organisation is such as to induce in us a belief in an experience-independent world which we then apply intuitively and find we cannot avoid.[19]

It is not entirely clear to me what is being argued here. Is the constancy and coherence of our sensory organisation such that it causally induces in us a belief in experience-independent objects? This doesn't seem to be the claim and it is in and of itself not terribly plausible. Our earliest memories are not of private sense data from which we develop over time concepts of experience-independent objects. Our earliest memories are of a world rather like the one we think we are in as adults, full of brightly coloured material objects, although they often seemed much bigger when we were much smaller. Developmental psychologists do speculate on stages of psychological development and concept acquisition but this is not on the basis of experiential testimony but behavioural responses to a world which is taken to be three dimensional, etc. It might also be argued that the actual development of a concept could have all sorts of causal origins and may even be innate.

If the argument is not a causal theory, then perhaps it is justificatory, our sensory organisation providing the rational justification for the application of concepts of experience-independent objects which we instinctively apply. The view used to be taken that sense data were the immediately given data of sense (hence the name) from which we inferred to the existence of objects which in some sense corresponded to them. Immediately given and certain sense data constituted the empiricist foundations of knowledge. The problem with this is that sense data

[18] Robinson, H: "The Failure of Disjunctivism to Deal with 'Philosophers' Hallucinations'" in Macpherson, F and Platchias, D (eds): *Hallucination – Philosophy and Psychology* (MIT Press, 2013)
[19] Foster, John: *A World For Us* (Oxford University Press, 2008)

as such are not data which provide the evidence for our inferences to the existence of experience-independent objects. We see the world automatically as filled with experience-independent objects and if anything our ability to identify sense data is dependent on the prior identification of what we take to be experience-independent objects, something Foster acknowledges.[20]

So it is not clear how the constancy and coherence of our perceptual experience is either cause or justification for the concepts we apply of an experience-independent world. Having said that, it is clearly a matter of some importance that our perceptual experience does not begin to contradict our expectations about the world. If our perceptual experience became utterly chaotic, then no doubt we would lose all ability to find our way round the world and to make judgements about it. Even so, I see no reason why experience in these circumstances might not still be as of a three dimensional world of independent objects. Why would our experience necessarily become that of a two dimensional colour array or at least not that of a chaotic world nonetheless independent of our minds? It seems not unlikely that our experience as of three dimensional objects which exist independently of our experience is something that is hard-wired into us providing we are appropriately exposed to such objects before the formation of conscious memories when we are in the early stages of childhood.

It does seem true that we could have the concepts we actually have without those concepts necessarily being true of the world we think they are true of. In other worlds, merely possessing the concepts we apply in experience does not prove that there is a world independent of our minds that we think there is. But the constancy and coherence argument wasn't intended to establish that there is such a world, only that we are able to think there is.



[20] Foster, John: *A World For Us* (Oxford University Press, 2008)

## Semantic direct realism (SDR)

Although one might be sceptical about the role of the constancy and coherence of perceptual experience in the formation of concepts of experience-independent objects as such, given that we obviously have such concepts, how might a sense datum theory be rendered compatible with some form of realism? Again, Howard Robinson has intriguingly put forward the theory of semantic direct realism.[21] Phenomenological direct realism has been ruled out by the five arguments above. The intrinsic properties of experience-independent objects are not directly present in our experience. Robinson argues this does not preclude our referring to a world independent of our experience. However we have acquired our concepts of an experience-independent world and whatever justification, if any, there is for applying such concepts in our experience, we do so even though our experience is not in fact such as to justify phenomenological direct realism. Robinson calls this semantic direct realism (SDR).

The old representative theories claimed we are presented in perceptual experience with experience-dependent objects directly which cut us off from the reality beyond to which we could only infer indirectly on the basis of our experience by virtue of inductive inference or inference to the best explanation. This raised, it has been argued, insuperable epistemological problems as we could never directly verify any confirming instance the experience-independent world that is posited and also insuperable conceptual problems in that we could not even conceive of what the world beyond experience might be like as our concepts were all derived from experience. SDR is intended to be a more realistic account of how our minds work in conceiving of a world that is not present in experience. The judgements or thoughts we make when we have experiences as of experience-independent objects are closely integrated with those experiences themselves. This is so much so we might even conceive of

[21] Robinson, Howard: "Semantic Direct Realism", paper delivered to the Joint CEU/Rutgers Conference on the Philosophy of Mind, Central European University January 2017

experiences thought of in terms of sense data being the vehicle for those thoughts rather as words act as the vehicle for thoughts in other contexts. Robinson describes the role of sense data on this view as follows:

"The phenomena – the sense data or ideas – have three important properties: (i) They are the vehicles for our sensory judgments, (ii) they are the way the physical world manifests itself to us, and (iii) they are the only categorical properties the world possesses".[22]

Point (ii) is of course what the phenomenological direct realist also believes and point (iii) has relevance in defending common sense against the argument from science as we will see. The most controversial claim is point (i). If sense data as the experience-dependent objects of perception are also the vehicles of our sensory judgements on an analogy with the way thought might be embodied in words and the vehicles of the judgment are also what is judged to be the way the physical world manifests itself to us, then the sensory judgments refer back to the vehicle of the judgement. The analogy with thoughts and words would be that the thoughts embodied in the words themselves refer to the words in which they are embodied. This does not seem to be the phenomenological situation. Phenomenologically the sense data are seen as intrinsic to the objects we think we are perceiving. Thought and judgement about these sensible properties seems quite separate from them conceptually and physically. It is difficult to know what to make of the idea that somehow a sense datum of a two dimensional colour array presented to us, which is one interpretation of a typical sense datum, is itself referring to itself as something different from what it is, ie the manifestation of the intrinsic properties of a material object.



[22] Robinson, Howard: "Idealism and Perception: Why Berkeleyan Idealism is not as Counterintuitive as it Seems" in Cowan, S.B and Spiegel, J.S (eds): *Idealism and Christian Philosophy – Volume 2, Idealism and Christianity* (Bloomsbury, 2016), p83.

One could take the position to be that we interpret the sense data we are presented with to be material objects, etc, and in so doing it is rather like interpreting words on a page and thereby understanding the thoughts they express. This certainly seems to be Robinson's view and Berkeley's before him.

Sense data have a problematic status on this view it seems to me. Sense data are being posited as uninterpreted direct objects of perceptual experience. However, we seem not to be aware of any such uninterpreted phenomena as I argued above in relation to the coherence and constancy argument. The objects of experience are presented to us as spatially located and independent of our experience and with intrinsic properties which are at least at times present in experience. Perhaps the sense data rather than being immediately given and uninterpreted are perhaps rather theoretical posits, such as the theoretical posits which play a role in cognitive science. But if treated as such, then they do not appear in personal level conscious experience.[23]

## What is SDR being realistic about?

The SDR theory is intended to do justice to two issues. The first is that contrary to what we think, the direct objects of perceptual experience are experience-dependent objects and not experience-independent objects and their intrinsic properties. The second is that the phenomenological direct realist view is deeply and apparently ineluctably ingrained in our beliefs about the world. SDR is intended to ameliorate concerns about the first by giving some ground to the second. Howard Robinson seems to claim further that the realism involved in SDR may not just be virtual. In other words, a realism about the world is not just what we have to think but is not metaphysically true, but it may conceivably be true. The Sense Datum Theory could be compatible with a realism about the world such that that world

[23] See John Campbell in Campbell, John and Cassam, Quassim: *Berkeley's Puzzle* (Oxford University Press, 2014)

is not in fact a lot dissimilar to how we naturally think the world to be. At the very least that is for further metaphysical examination. At the level of thought and perceptual judgment, realism is in good standing.[24]

I think this is deeply problematic. Granted we can apply concepts of experience-independent objects on the basis of our experience even though such objects don't exist, what epistemological grounds do we have for believing that any such objects do exist? The problem here is not just the familiar ones of induction and best explanation as the only epistemic theories available to justify belief in these objects. The problem, I believe, lies even more deeply at the epistemological and conceptual levels. Our orientation on and ability to refer to the objects in the world is crucially dependent on experience.[25] Without experience of objects and their spatial locations I don't see how reference is secured. Reference to objects we cannot experience is always secured by reference to objects we can experience and locate in space. Moreover we can give no content to what we are referring to except through the sensible properties that we perceptually experience or at least some sort of relation to them.

## Reference, content and realism

What provides the content to some of the basic terms we use to refer to the world of material objects in three dimensional space we believe we are surrounded by and by what means do we secure identifying reference to such objects? It seems to me that these are the two crucial questions that any theory of semantic reference must answer. Working in the first instance from a common sense view in which I will take for granted that material objects are directly present in our perceptual experience, the answer to the first question will be that it is the

[24] Robinson, Howard: "Idealism and Perception: Why Berkeleyan Idealism is not as Counterintuitive as it Seems" in Cowan, S.B and Spiegel, J.S (eds): *Idealism and Christian Philosophy – Volume 2, Idealism and Christianity* (Bloomsbury, 2016)

[25] Campbell, John: *Reference and Consciousness* (Clarendon Press, 2002)

colours, the textures and the shapes of objects which give them their substance for us. Without any colour or texture, I cannot see how we make sense of their shape other than in the most abstract terms that can only be made concrete when we apply those abstract terms in the context of things we experience as having colour and texture. Colour, texture and shape also then play the crucial role in identifying reference to those objects for it is through their colour, texture and shape that we are able to locate their position in relation to us and our bodies. But if the sensible properties by which we secure both our substantive concepts of material objects and identifying reference to them are in fact not properties of the objects themselves but rather only of our experience, then there no longer exists the means by which we can give substance to our concepts of material objects other than by projection as virtual objects.

Even more significantly, we have lost the means by which to secure identifying reference to such objects as the properties we need for this are all in fact merely features of experience. This is not to deny that we can seem to have such objects in our experience and seem to secure reference to them. Our experience may be so ordered as to sustain such a virtual reality for us. However this reality is just a feature of our experience and cannot be known to have any relation to a reality beyond our experience. That is a fundamental epistemological problem. But we also cannot make any sense of how a reality independent of experience could relate to this experience where the objects and the space in which they exist is merely a projection of our thoughts on the basis of our experience.[26]

This, it seems to me, was the fundamental problem for Kant's transcendental idealism in which there was an equivocation as he seemed to bring concepts to bear on the relationship of his experience to that which lay beyond experience, when those concepts only had

[26] Strawson, P.F: *Individuals* (Methuen, 1959) and Campbell, John: *Reference and Consciousness* (Clarendon Press, 2002)

application within experience itself. But if we can make no real sense of a reality independent of experience if the sensible properties are in actuality only features of our experience because we cannot either give substance to such putative objects or secure identifying reference to them, then I do not see how semantic direct realism works. Any theory which places the sensible properties in experience rather than in the objects themselves will run into the same problem, that not only is the world we think we have contact with made epistemologically problematic, we literally have no idea how a world independent of our experience could relate to our experience.

The problem then for semantic direct realism is that it is supposed to secure an unmediated reference to objects beyond experience. But it cannot do this by virtue of the fact that experience is crucial to securing reference and there is literally nothing present for SDR to refer to which is itself experience-independent. What SDR can refer to are the sense data presented in experience but they are experience-dependent. In other words, either SDR is referring to things in themselves beyond any possible experience in which case we are as much in the dark as to what these could possibly be and how reference could be made to them, the problem which beset Kantian transcendental idealism, or they refer to experience-dependent objects in which case we have not escaped the metaphysics of an essentially Berkeleyan idealism. We can interpret our experiences as being of a three dimensional world filled with material objects with intrinsic properties all of which are experience-independent. But if these properties are in fact experience-dependent, our world is in fact other than we think it to be and we simply believe the wrong metaphysics. The reality we believe in is in fact a form of virtual reality and Semantic Direct Realism doesn't seem to offer a possible way out.

# Chapter Two: Representationalism

## What is representationalism?

Representational theories of perception have become dominant in the analytical philosophy of perception in recent years. The common factor in all representational theories is that in perceptual experience the mind represents perceptually that the world is a certain way. Such representation is considered to be conceptual in some theories and non-conceptual or at least partially non-conceptual in others. Either way, there is an analogy with the way that thought is taken to represent the world. Thoughts about the world can be true or false. Similarly, perceptual experience on the representational theory can be true or false or correct or incorrect or accurate or inaccurate.[27]

The attractions of representational theories are obvious. Firstly, the representational theory appears to deal with the problems of perceptual relativity, illusion, hallucination, the time gap and science without positing non-physical intermediaries like sense data. Secondly, they are usually construed as direct realist on an analogy with thought, insofar as no intermediary is posited between the thought itself and the reality of which it is a thought. Otherwise thought would be cut off from the reality it is supposed to be about. Thirdly, for those of a physicalist and reductionist inclination, there is the hope that perceptual experience, if it is representational, may be given a functional analysis just as they believe the so-called propositional attitudes can be. And functionalism, as a form of sophisticated behaviourism would make perceptual experience fully compatible with a physicalist ontology.



[27] Notable contemporary philosophers defending some form of representationalism include Alex Byrne, Tim Crane, Fred Drestske, Adam Pautz, Susanna Siegel and Michael Tye but there are many more.

How does representationalism address the five issues which gave rise to the sense datum theory?

## Representationalism and the five arguments for sense data

With regard to the relativity of colour experience, representationalists can claim that perceptual experience represents the colour of an object, say in the standard or optimal conditions of observation, which could be daylight when it is neither too dark from clouds nor too bright from sunshine. That will be the representation of the colour constancy of the object. But in addition the experience represents the specific conditions in which the perceptual experience is taking place, the point of view of the observer in terms of spatial position and orientation, the lighting conditions and so forth.[28] But in representing the specific conditions of observation, the representation need not be taken as ascribing to the objects of perception the precise colours being experienced (and therefore represented) in those conditions. However these will be the phenomenal features of the experience because there is a contrast to be drawn between the colours we are actually experiencing and the colour we ascribe to the object itself. The colour ascribed to the object as intrinsic to it need only be the colour ascribed in the standard or optimal viewing conditions. This will be when the representation of the phenomenal colour coincides with the colour ascribed to the object intrinsically.

For the representation to be a representation of a specific object it can be argued that two further conditions must be met. Firstly, the representation must be sufficiently similar to the represented object and its properties for it to be reasonable to claim a match. If you are looking at a brown, wooden table but your experience is of a large, green frog, then one could not reasonably claim that you are seeing a table but in sub-optimal conditions. The

[28] Peacocke, Christopher: *Sense and Content* (Oxford University Press, 1983)

dissimilarity between the representation and the allegedly represented is too great. Secondly, there must be an appropriate causal connection between the object and its properties that are represented and the representation itself. If you have a perceptual representation of a brown, wooden table in the presence of a brown, wooden table but where the perceptual experience is not caused by the brown, wooden table itself but either by a chance occurrence of the underlying brain state or by a neuroscientist stimulating your brain into the relevant brain state directly, then again we would be reluctant to claim that you are actually seeing the brown, wooden table.

For illusions, such as the bent stick illusion, this can be addressed by the representationalist by saying that the perceptual experience indeed is representing the stick as bent, but it is an illusion because the stick is not in fact bent. In other words, the perceptual experience is representing the object inaccurately. And it can do so with us nonetheless believing correctly that the stick is not bent. It is not the case that every case of perceptual illusion actually misleads us in our beliefs.

Similarly, hallucinations will be perceptual representations as of an object before us when there is no such object. Again this is a straightforward case of a perceptual experience representing the world inaccurately, although the inaccuracy will be more radical than the case of illusion as there is no object at all in the case of the hallucination.

With the time gap, the representationalist can argue that perceptual experience represents the objects of experience as though they were directly present in experience and doing the things right now that we see them as doing but the objects of experience do not actually have to be contemporaneous with the representation itself for the representation to be accurate. It is possible the perceptual representation may be taken to be misleading insofar as it is representing the events perceptually experienced as happening now or perhaps we can have

experience as of a star millions of light years away where our knowledge now that they are millions of light years away may affect our perceptual experience so that we take it to be informing us not as to how the star is at that very moment but only how it was when the light by which we are able to see the star was first emitted from the object.

Finally, our perceptual experience represents the world in terms of coloured objects, etc which make up what Sellars called the 'manifest image' of the world.[29] That may be sufficiently accurate for us to make our way successfully through the world. But it need not be taken to imply that that is the ultimate truth about the world. We may be so fashioned physiologically and psychologically that the manifest image is, so to speak, imposed on us by our perceptual experience, but science may still be taken to show that the world in itself is not coloured but consists rather of the entities and their properties that are posited by fundamental physics. Alternatively we may take our manifest image representations to be just as true as the representations we have of the physical world beyond our direct experience. These are just different ways of representing the different properties of the world but one is not more ontologically fundamental than the other.

## Problems for representationalism

Representationalism therefore seems on the face of it to successfully address a host of problems that seemed to push us in the direction of a sense datum theory but without the unfortunate ontological implications. However, there are a number of fundamental problems with representationalism which I think should lead us to reject the theory in any of its diverse forms.

The first and I think foremost problem for representationalism is that it has to account for how representation in perceptual experience differs from representation in thought. David

[29] Sellars, Wilfrid: *Science, Perception and Reality* (Routledge, 1963)

Armstrong had a version of the representational theory in his belief theory of perception.[30] He sought to distinguish perception from other forms of propositional attitude through the complexity of the beliefs that we have in perception. Belief theories are rejected nowadays because beliefs are often thought to be unconscious, dispositional states of mind whereas perceptual experiences are conscious, occurrent states. But a comparable view would be to see perceptual states as perhaps very complicated intentional states going well beyond our capacities to conceptualise explicitly the content of such states. Specific experiential states may also be differentiated, into visual experience, tactile experience, thought, etc, by having been formed through different forms of processing in the brain whereas there is no such specific processing path associated with thought.

There is nonetheless the specifically sensory and presentational aspects of perception which cannot be omitted from any theory of perception. When we see a coloured object, we are not just thinking of it in a special and complicated way. Intuitively the contrast with thought is that the properties of an object and the object itself will be perceptually present in the perceptual experience. Representational theories have to do justice to that presentational aspect of the phenomenology of experience and they have to do justice to it not just in veridical cases but in all cases where the immediate properties present in experience vary from the properties we ascribe as intrinsic properties of the object or where the properties are present but there is no object.

Some representational theories claim that when the perceptual experience is veridical, the representation is of the mind-independent objects of perception themselves. This would be to make the representational theory very similar to the relational direct realist theories with regard to veridical perception. Phenomenological direct realism will be true of veridical experiences. But this seems to be a breach of the representational principle and to confuse the

[30] Armstrong, David: *Perception and the Physical* World (Routledge, 1961)

representing and the represented. There are two fundamental features of representationalism. The first is that the representing representation can be more or less accurate of a reality independent of it which it purports to represent. The second is that this enables a common account to be given for the veridical and non-veridical cases in terms of the representing, the difference lying in whether the representing representation is more or less accurate of the represented. But how then can the represented itself be in the representing representation? Thought may reach to reality without mediation when the thought is true but surely that reality isn't in the thought itself. Reality cannot be true or false, it is just reality. It is representations that are true or false of reality.[31] So if the world is to enter our experience directly, it cannot be through representations.

There also needs to be an account of the presentational aspects of non-veridical perceptual representations. Some representationalists seem to believe that the colours of the objects that we seem to perceive but which are not true of the object perceived or or which we seem to perceive when there is no object should be considered to be purely intentional in the way that a thought can have an intentional object. We can perfectly happily think of a unicorn, for example, which is in fact non-existent but where no ontological problem is posed requiring us to posit unicorn-like entities. The problem is that in a non-veridical experience we are nonetheless confronted with actual colours, otherwise it wouldn't be the experience it is. This is what motivated the phenomenal principle. In both veridical and non-veridical cases colours, for example, must be represented phenomenally. So the colours as perceptually experienced have some form of existence which is absent when they are merely thought of.

If it is necessary to posit not just that the colours in illusions and hallucination are represented but also presented when they are not actually properties of mind-independent objects, this

[31] Charles Travis makes a very strong case against the idea that perceptual experience has a content which puts it on a par with thought in, amongst other places, Travis, Charles: *Perception* (Oxford University Press, 2013)

then poses a problem with veridical perception. The spreading argument can now be used as a further reason to deny that representationalist theories can treat veridical perception in phenomenological direct realist terms.[32] If representationalism cannot explain away the colours experienced as non-existent intentional objects in the cases of illusion and hallucination, then the colours must be phenomenal features of the perceptual representation itself. But if that is the case in the non-veridical case, it must also be the case with veridical perception.

If the properties we took to be properties of experience-independent objects are in fact merely properties of the representation, we seem to be back to where we were with the sense datum theory. We do not in fact have the direct phenomenological contact with experience-independent properties we thought we had. We only therefore represent as if there were an experience-independent world. We have no direct contact with it. Whilst different representational theories deal with the relationship of the sensory to perceptual judgment or thought differently, some seeing the relationship as merely causal, some unconscious, some adverbial or adjectival and some as the phenomenal features in some way supervening on the content of the representations, they all have a very important feature in common with sense datum theories. The properties we thought were properties of objects directly presented to us in perception are in fact features of experience itself.



## The sensory and the conceptual

There is a further problem with representationalism. It is in understanding how concepts are acquired and what constitutes their manifestation or possession. One obvious way to understand how concepts are acquired is to see them as being derived in the first instance from experience. This is not to seek to reduce all concepts to actual and possible experience

[32] Robinson, Howard: "Semantic Direct Realism", paper delivered to the Joint CEU/Rutgers Conference on the Philosophy of Mind, Central European University January 2017

as argued for by the logical positivists. But it is to say that at least some concepts must be derived from experience if others are then to develop. How could we possess a full concept of redness for example if we had never been exposed to samples of red-coloured objects? This is one of the conclusions one might draw from Frank Jackson's so-called "knowledge argument".[33]

Some might argue that it is wrong to posit a priori the process which leads to us possessing concepts. Perhaps concept possession is innate, for all we know from our armchairs. Certainly, it seems reasonable to suppose we have in-built proclivities to develop certain concepts from the experiences and socialisation that we undergo at an early stage but none of this addresses the issue of justification. This is just a story of developmental psychology. Perhaps a better line of thought here is to ask what would constitute possession of a concept for example of a table or of the colours. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the possession and understanding of certain concepts is manifested in and largely constituted by certain abilities at least some of which normally have behavioural manifestations. This might be constituted by being able to discriminate objects and colours from one another in the pursuit of certain tasks and, for language using creatures, the ability to use certain words in sentences appropriately, being able to give explanations of words when asked and understanding the words used by others in sentences.[34] The argument would then be that the manifestation of the possession and understanding of concepts requires response to that which is not itself conceptual and there must therefore be aspects of perceptual experience which gives us access to the world which goes beyond representation.[35] John McDowell seems to argue that we can make no sense of experience rationally justifying thought unless it is already conceptualised in a way that allows the content of an experience to be taken up by

[33] Jackson, Frank: "Epiphenomenal Qualia" in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 127 (April 1982)
[34] Baker, Gordon and Hacker, P.M.S: *Wittgenstein – Understanding and Meaning* (2nd Edition, Blackwell, 2004)
[35] Van Cleve, James: *Problems from Reid* (Oxford University Press, 2015)

the propositional attitudes and allows it to do so because the content is the same.[36] But this would seem to beg the question against those who believe that experience simply lays reality out before us, to which we then respond by developing appropriate concepts which can then be used in judgements which can be true of that reality.[37] [38]

## Representationalism and the sense datum theory

I want to raise a further even more fundamental problem for representationalism. When we have perceptual experience we seem to have experience of experience-independent objects and their intrinsic properties. On the representational theory, I have argued that the phenomenal properties cannot be the properties of experience-independent objects; they are the properties of representations. That is the conclusion we have to draw from way in which representationalism is supposed to provide a solution to the colour relativity, illusion and hallucination arguments. Different representationalists theorise the exact relationship between the sensory and the conceptual differently. Some believe it is a causal relation, some that the sensory is not in any sense a focus of attention, others that the sensory supervenes in some sense on the representation.[39] But they all have in common that the specifically sensory features of experience are in the head or the mind, features of experience rather than of the objects we believe we are having perceptual experience of. Howard Robinson, rightly in my

[36] McDowell, John: *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1994)

[37] Travis, Charles: *Perception* (Oxford University Press, 2013) and also "Deliverances (Indirection)" in *Topoi* 2016, online at https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11245-015-9357-9

[38] Another response to this argument is that the non-conceptual aspect of experience might be taken to be a non-conceptual representation. The problem with this suggestion, it seems to me, is that it is not clear exactly what a non-conceptual representation is. In the first instance, representationalism is explicated on the basis of an analogy with the propositional attitudes such as belief or more generally thought. If we take a typical expression of a thought, we understand what a thought is referring to and what the thought is expressing about the referent of the thought. If we take a schema of a basic sentence Fa, we can say that it is ascribing the property F to the object a. But this is at the level of conceptualisation. F may be understood to be a concept representing a property and a is a name representing an object. But how does this work when there are no concepts? There may be behavioural manifestations which we might feel justify ascribing propositional attitudes without ascribing concept possession if the creature lacks a language but that is not the same as having a conscious perceptual representation from the inside. But this requires a much longer discussion than I have room for here.

[39] Paul Coates argues it is a causal connection guiding judgement and behaviour in Coates, Paul: *The Metaphysics of Perception* (Routledge, 2007) and David Smith argues that sensory properties are not the objects or focus of perceptual experience or attention in Smith, A.D: *The Problem of Perception* (Harvard, 2002)

view, queries whether the representationalist theory therefore actually takes us beyond where we were with the sense datum theory.[40]

If the sensible or sensory properties are in the head or the mind in any way analogous to the way that sense data are, then it is difficult to see, just as it was in the case of the sense datum theory, how representationalism can be a realist theory. For we have no way of knowing what the properties are of the experience-independent objects we take perceptual experience to be representing and no way of being able to identify them in order to refer to them. The best the representational theory will then provide is a virtual reality based upon the sensory and the conceptual this gives rise to, just as in the case of the sense datum theory, and that is a metaphysics radically at odds with common sense and indeed what representationalism was thought to justify.



[40] Robinson, Howard: "Semantic Direct Realism", paper delivered to the Joint CEU/Rutgers Conference on the Philosophy of Mind, Central European University January 2017

# Chapter three: Phenomenological direct realism

## Phenomenological direct realism and the five arguments

Neither the sense datum theory nor representationalism seem to have provided the means to secure the kind of realism that is at least implicit in the common sense view of the world. Phenomenological direct realism on the other hand does seem to provide the basis for that common sense view but it remains to see whether it can coherently respond to the five arguments against it and also whether there are not more conceptual problems that nonetheless accompany it.[41]

Phenomenological direct realism is the idea that at least some, perhaps most, of the time the properties we experience directly in perceptual experience are the properties of objects that exist independently of our minds and that it is through the direct experience of these properties that we have perceptual experience of the objects themselves. The broader framework within which the common sense view is held is that we live in a world of three dimensional objects located in a three dimensional space in which these objects can interact and have causal effects on one another in so doing. This is the framework in which I want to suggest some responses to each of the five arguments.

### The argument from science

It is commonly assumed that the entities posited by physics are dispositional in nature and, being beyond direct observation, we know nothing of their intrinsic categorical properties if

[41] Contemporary philosophers defending some form of relational direct realism which accepts PDR include Bill Brewer, John Campbell, William Fish, M.G.F. Martin and Charles Travis. Peter Hacker has also defended what is in effect a direct realist theory from a Wittgensteinian viewpoint but would probably eschew the label direct realist.

they have such properties.[42] Far from this representing a challenge to phenomenological direct realism, I would argue that securing any grasp of the theoretical entities posited by physics is dependent on the properties manifested in perceptual experience.[43] How else could we carry out the experiments and confirm or refute them other than through the equipment that physics relies on for experimentation which is identified through their manifest properties? Moreover, I would argue we can give no sense to a world that was purely composed of dispositional properties. Swinburne has argued effectively that to secure a grasp of these theoretical dispositional properties ultimately there must be some sort of manifestation in the categorical.[44] The only categorical properties we have a grasp of, though, are those that are manifested in our experience, ie the colours and the shapes that our perceptual experience reveals to us.[45] However problematic then the relationship might still be between the theoretical posits of physics and the objects we perceptually experience, they cannot eliminate from the world the properties through which we gain any understanding of the world including our understanding of physics.[46]

## The time lag argument

The time lag argument is a direct product of an appreciation that we do live in a spatial world in which objects causally interact with one another but where such interaction may take a finite time to take place. In seeing objects as they were some time ago as a result of the



[42] Shoemaker, Sydney: "Causality and Properties" in Shoemaker, Sidney: *Identity, Cause and Mind* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), Lewis, David: "Ramseyan Humility" in Braddon-Mitchell, David and Nola, Robert (eds.): Conceptual Analysis and Philosophical Naturalism, (MIT Press, 2009) and Blackburn, Simon: "Filling in Space" in *Analysis* 1991, volume 51 (2)

[43] See Campbell, John: *Reference and Consciousness* (Clarendon Press, 2002)

[44] Swinburne, Richard: "Properties, Causation, and Projectibility: Reply to Shoemaker" in Cohen L.J. and Hesse, M (eds): *Applications of Inductive Logic* (Oxford University Press, 1980)

[45] Robinson, Howard: *From the Knowledge Argument to Mental Substance* (Cambridge University Press, 2016)

[46] The problem might be exemplified in Campbell, John: *Reference and Consciousness* (Clarendon Press, 2002) where John Campbell argues that the categorical properties manifested in experience are required for us to make sense of and identifying reference to material objects but where those objects and their sensible properties themselves supervene on the dispositional properties of the theoretical entities posited by fundamental physics. It is not clear to me how the categorical objects and properties which ground our notions of the dispositional can themselves then supervene on the dispositional.

distance they are from us does not entail we are therefore seeing something other than the objects themselves. We are just seeing them as they were rather than as they currently are. This is not a mysterious seeing into the past. On the contrary, it merely entails that how objects appear to us is how they were, not how they currently are. No mediation between object and perceptual experience needs to be posited, just an acknowledgement that we live in a spatial and causally connected world in which light travels at a finite speed to inform us of the objects we observe.

## The relativity of colour perception

We have drawn a contrast between the colours we ascribe to objects intrinsically and the colours we often directly experience when we perceptually experience an object. The colours we ascribe to an object intrinsically will be the colour the object is seen to have in certain optimal lighting conditions. We decorate houses, paint cars, etc, on this basis. We know however that conditions of perception may not always be optimal, for example when lighting conditions change externally or where there may be some change to one's ability to see because of changes to the retina, etc. When conditions change externally, the change in colours we directly experience will be something we share just as we share the appearance of objects in optimal conditions. Internal changes are not shared in the same way but they are detectable, for example, by opticians who can then seek to correct them in various ways.

We are perfectly familiar with explaining our changing colour perceptions of, for example, material objects by invoking causal conditions, conditions such as place of observation, distance from object, lighting conditions, state of one's retinae, etc. Perception of objects as being of a certain colour depends on our perceptual faculties and embodies a normative element in selecting particular conditions as being the conditions which reveal the intrinsic colour of the object. None of this seems to entail the positing of intermediate objects between

our perceptual experience and the object itself. On the contrary, we still accept that we can see objects even when the colours we directly experience are clearly not the colours we ascribe to the object intrinsically. So I can see the outline of the chair in the dark. I am not inclined to ascribe the darkness to the chair as its intrinsic colour. That is revealed only in the optimal lighting conditions. But the colours I directly experience are still in some sense revealing the object to me, if only its shape.

Howard Robinson has suggested that the positing of an object in such circumstances is only a logical construct.[47] This is the implication of his theory of semantic direct realism. However I see no reason to treat this as a logical construct unless one has already concluded that the arguments against phenomenological direct realism are valid.

## The argument from illusion

The colours we directly experience, although sometimes not the colours we are inclined to attribute to the objects intrinsically, usually do not present a misleading appearance. In illusions our perceptual experience is misleading. That does not mean of course that we are misled. We do not think the straight stick that looks bent is actually bent (providing, for example, we saw the stick was straight prior to partial immersion in water). However, the appearance is so different from how we know the objects in themselves to be, we accept that there is some sort of illusion going on. Again, we usually have causal explanations for this. Different illusions will require different kinds of explanation. For example, the straight stick looking bent in water is to do with the diffraction of light. The Muller-Lyre illusion on the other hand has more to do with the cues we seemingly hard-wired use to gauge length, and so on. But again there is a framework of explanation for these illusions in causal terms. What the PDR theorist must resist is the reification of the colours we directly experience into sense

[47] Robinson, Howard: "Semantic Direct Realism", paper delivered to the Joint CEU/Rutgers Conference on the Philosophy of Mind, Central European University January 2017

data, the so-called phenomenological principle, whilst not implausibly denying that in illusions, etc, we are subject to a sensory presentation.[48]

## The hallucination argument

In hallucinations, we seem to be presented with objects and their sensible properties but there is in fact no such object at all. This is the contrast both with issues of colour relativity and with illusions. For some it has provided the basis for what they believe to be the strongest argument for sense data or at least to put the sensible properties in experience or representation rather than in the objects themselves. However, again within a causal framework, there are explanations as to why someone may be seeing something but that something not be there whilst in (most) other cases, the object is there just as they think it is.

Some have argued that in cases of hallucination there is no phenomenal fact of the matter at all, only the belief that an experience is being had which is indistinguishable from the experience you would actually be having if such an object existed.[49] This may be resisted on the grounds that we can imagine exactly identical brain states supporting the same experience except in one case the brain state is appropriately connected in such a way that we take the experience to be veridically of the object it is so causally connected to whereas in the other it is not connected to any object corresponding to the experience itself at all. What motivates the claim that in one case there will be phenomenological facts and in the other case not. As Howard Robinson has put it, how does the brain itself know which is which?[50] There is a further problem with this theory of hallucination and that is it cannot be extended to cases of illusion or colour relativity without absurdity, for it would confine the phenomenal to very few cases of perceptual experience indeed. For if it is true that in hallucination we do not

[48] Contra Austin, J.L: *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford University Press, 1962)
[49] For example, Fish, William: *Perception, Hallucination and Illusion* (Oxford University Press, 2009)
[50] Robinson, Howard: *Perception* (Routledge, 1994)

have phenomenal experience, then why do we have it in any case where we apparently are experiencing colours which are not the intrinsic colours of the objects we are observing?

So we should reject this particular version of disjunctivism. In hallucinations we certainly can be having experiences exactly like veridical experiences phenomenologically although we may not necessarily as a consequence believe those experiences to be veridical. Although we should accept that the experience itself, from a phenomenological point of view, may be indistinguishable from a veridical experience, we do want to say that there is a fundamental metaphysical difference between the two experiences. In the veridical case one is seeing an experience-independent object itself, in the case of hallucination one is not.

There are clearly causal differences between the two. In the veridical case, the object that you are seeing is in some kind of causal connection to the perceptual experience to enable this to happen. In the hallucination, there is no such object and the causal reason for the experience will be something, for example some hallucinogenic drug, affecting one's brain but which is not itself the object of the perceptual experience. But what kind of causal connection can bring the object right into the perceptual experience itself when it is veridical so that it is part of the content of that experience in a way it is not in a hallucinatory experience.

## Causality and internal relations

The case of hallucination represents a challenge to the kind of causation that is occurring in veridical perceptual experience. A basic assumption of our metaphysical picture of a three dimensional spatial world with spatially located objects interacting with one another is a certain kind of metaphysical atomism. This the basis, I believe, for Howard Robinson's principle "same proximate cause, same effect" which then underpins his causal argument for

sense data.[51] Assuming that a perceptual experience is identical with a brain state, or supervenes on it or is immediately caused by it, then if there is the same brain state there will be the same experience. We then might very reasonably assume that in a veridical experience, the brain state giving rise to the experience is appropriately connected causally to the putative object of the experience. But if that brain state can then be reproduced in the absence of the longer causal chain that led back to the object of that experience, then the reproduced brain state cannot give rise to an experience of the object that was assumed to be the object of experience where there was an appropriate causal chain. But the perceptual experience is the same in both cases because of its relationship to the same brain state. From this is might be deduced that the object that was thought to be the direct object of experience cannot be and there can only be an external connection to that object.

If phenomenological direct realism is true, then this cannot be the metaphysical situation. Distal causes must have an impact on the nature of the perceptual experience itself even if there is no phenomenological difference between this and an experience where there is no such appropriate distal cause. For that experience to be an experience of that object, then that object must determine the content of that experience. And surely that can only be the case where the kind of causation involved is not one that is compatible with metaphysical atomism. Distal causes change the very nature of the experience being had even if the brain state is the same as a brain state with different distal causes. In other words, the specific distal causal relations between object and perceptual experience produce an internal relation which cannot exist under metaphysical atomism. Without some sort of internal relation created by



[51] Robinson, Howard: *Perception* (Routledge, 1994)

the causal relationship, it seems to me it will be very difficult to resist Robinson's causal argument.[52]

## Causation, perception and conception

Some have argued that it is not appropriate to use causal concepts in relation to perception. Causation may operate at a sub-personal level, say as described in the terms in which cognitive science describes the perceptual process or perhaps at more basic levels than this in terms of neuroscience and physics, but at the personal level our conception of perceptual experience is not a causal conception.[53]

There are two problems with this claim. The first is that if this is so then the conception of a perceptual experience becomes even more problematic. It is clear that the perceptual experience itself occurs at a physical distance from the object of experience. In fact it is impossible to see an object if it is moved too close to the eye to the point where it might even touch the eyeball. How can an object be affecting a perceptual experience physically distant from it except causally? If it isn't causal, how can it be a physical relation at all? So it might be right to deny a causal relation here but only at the expense of compounding the philosophically problematic nature of perception.

Secondly, causation seems to enter into our common sense notion of perception. Not only do we see objects having causal relationships to one another, we know that causal factors affect our perceptual experiences of those objects all the time. Dimming the lights, darkness falling, movement towards and away from an object, moving round the object, even opening and closing our eyes are all ideas involving the concept of causation. And so is an awareness of internal changes such as changes to the retinae requiring glasses to correct and the changes

[52] J.M. Hinton argues different causal principles are at work at different levels in Hinton, J.M: *Experiences* (Oxford University Press, 1973) although he does not put it in terms of internal relations or invest it with the metaphysical significance that I would.

[53] Hyman, John: "The Causal Theory of Perception" in *The Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 42, No 168 (1992)

that then take place when one takes off or puts on one's glasses. So it is odd to claim that the concept of causation has no role to play in explicating the relationship between perceptual experience and object. Grice of course goes further to argue that we can only make sense of veridical and non-veridical experience through the idea of non-deviant and deviant causal chains.[54]

There is a further trivial way in which the connection between a perceptual experience and an object may be rendered internal even though the relationship between the two is causal without challenging metaphysical atomism. We can, of course, render any relationship into an internal conceptual connection by redescription. So we need only describe a perceptual experience as being of a certain object to which it is connected in the right way and we have made the conceptual connection. But redescription does not produce the metaphysical internal relation we need to resist the Robinson argument. If the experience can be fully described independently of the putative object of perception, then we have metaphysically isolated it, so to speak. That is what the identification of the relevant brain state does. We find it relatively easy to imagine a brain state on its own isolated from its proximate and distal causes. We need a relationship in which metaphysically the perceptual experience and object are linked in a way which determines the very identity of the experience itself even though there is physical distance between object and experience and such a relationship does not sit easily with the implicit metaphysical atomism we ascribe to material objects in space.

## Subjectivity

This is reinforced by the subjectivity of perceptual experience. By subjectivity I mean the fact that perceptual experience is characterized by the presentation of objects and their sensible properties spatially located in a broader state of affairs to a subject. I do not see how we can

[54] Grice, H.P: "The Causal Theory of Perception" in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* Supplementary Volume 1961

understand the nature of a perceptual experience without understanding this idea of presentation and if there is presentation, there is a subject to which the presenting is happening. This is a very thin idea of a subject, compatible with the identity of the subject being very short-lived, changing with every change in experience, or a subject more like the idea we have of subject persisting over time and even between periods of consciousness.[55]

Such a subject is not itself an object of experience in the process of having the perceptual experience. It is a Humean mistake to look for a subject as an object of experience in this sense. A subject is not an object of experience when it is being the subject of experience. This is not to say the subject cannot be an object of experience perhaps for a separate perceptual experience and certainly for thought which itself, if conscious, must also have a subject, the same subject perhaps, depending on the criteria of personal identity. Nor is this to deny that the criteria of identity of such a subject and its experiences crucially depend on association with material objects such as specific human bodies, forming what we understand as a person. If spatial location is ultimately essential for the identity of particulars, experiences and their subjects will have to be spatially located or related to that which is, such as a particular human body. But if it is correct that perceptual experience is characterized by the presence in the experience of objects (whether these are sense data or experience-independent objects) then, it seems to me, there must be a subject to which these objects are presented.

The other aspect of this relationship of presentation is the idea that the subject is directly acquainted with objects in perception (again this has to be true on a sense datum theory and a realist theory). But neither the concept of presentation nor that of acquaintance are obviously



[55] Strawson, Galen: *The Subject of Experience* (Oxford University Press, 2017), Zahavi, D: "Consciousness and Minimal Selfhood" in Kriegel, U (ed): *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Consciousness* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming) and Zahavi, D and Kriegel, U: "For-Me-Ness – What it is and what it is not" in Dahlstrom, D, Elpidorou, A and Hopp, W (eds): *Philosophy of Mind and Phenomenology – Conceptual and Empirical Approaches* (Routledge, 2016)

compatible with the metaphysical atomism of our understanding of the physical.[56] There has to be a causal relation between perceptual experience and object but the object itself and its sensible properties have to be presented directly to the subject and the subject has to be directly acquainted with the object, despite the physical distance and compatibly with a causal process between object and perceptual experience. The subjectivity of experience reinforces the idea that if the subject is to be presented with experience-independent objects and their sensible properties in perceptual experience, then the identity of the experience itself depends on the distal object and the relationship between the experience and the object is metaphysically internal. But in addition, the subject is in a metaphysically challenging sense private in a way that is not obviously compatible with materialism. This raises the further issue of the privacy of experience.

## Privacy of experience

It has been assumed by some that the defence of phenomenological direct realism, may be a way of defusing the concerns over the hard problem of consciousness.[57] Such an assumption seems to me to have rested on the idea that the hard problem of consciousness has implicitly if not explicitly rested on the idea that the objects of experience are logically private. Once the objects of perception are deemed to be public, then it is assumed there is no longer a philosophical problem of consciousness to be solved.

The internal relation between a perceptual experience and its experience-independent property and its sensible properties and the subjectivity of experience are both I believe essential features of phenomenological direct realism and both seem incompatible with a

[56] Both Paul Coates in Coates, Paul: *The Metaphysics of Perception* (Routledge, 2007) and Howard Robinson in Robinson, Howard: *Perception* (Routledge, 1994) have challenged the idea that acquaintance in this sense can be understood in terms compatible with a common understanding of physicalism.

[57] Campbell, John: "The Metaphysics of Perception", in Sosa, Ernest and Villanueva, Enrique (eds): *The Metaphysics of Epistemology: Philosophical Issues* volume 17 (Blackwell, 2007), 1-15

certain understanding of the metaphysics of the material world and therefore suggest that far from the problem of consciousness being resolved by direct realism, the conceptual problems if anything have become greater. I think this is in turn reinforced by a privacy of experience that seems to me inescapable and which creates yet further conceptual problems even if the objects of experience are experience-independent.

It is a basic assumption of common sense and of direct realism that we have perceptual experience of a common world so that we see the same things in the same way. Arguably this is the basis on which we have shared language and shared concepts and perhaps could not have such a shared language and concepts otherwise. But whilst we may share the objects of experience, the experience itself is not shared and cannot be. This is best understood, I think, by seeing perceptual experience as in some sense a threefold relation between subject, experience and object. The object of experience on a direct realist view is experience-independent but, as we have seen, it is internally related to the experience and at least partially defines the identity of the experience. The experience on the other hand is private in the sense that it cannot be directly observed by others. This is not the kind of privacy that can be understood either in terms of being hidden from view the way a material object is or in terms of ownership. It is a certain kind of logical privacy.

If perceptual experience were identical with a brain state, then we could understand privacy of experience in terms of being hidden from view. The brain and the states it is in are hidden behind the skull. But thermal imaging or other advances in seeing the activity of the brain, despite its covering of bone, would break down that privacy. But perceptual experience is such that you would still not be seeing the experience which is why it is so hard to believe any identity theory of mind.

It might be suggested that this claim will fall foul of the private language argument if the latter is cogent. How it might be asked can we even have a concept of such a logically private aspect of perceptual experience, never mind being able to share it? I don't think one needs to challenge the cogency of the private language argument however to see that any such argument has to be compatible with the postulated logical privacy. Firstly, if we are seeing publicly accessible experience-independent objects when we are having a veridical perceptual experience, then we do not fall foul of the private language arguments about publicly available and repeatable samples.

Nor need we be in any state of uncertainty as to what others are perceptually experiencing. They can tell us what they are seeing in terms of objects we ourselves have experienced or are experiencing. We can tell that they are seeing objects pretty much as we are by their behavior, the direction of their eyes, the responses they make to different scenes we share, avoiding solid objects and oncoming cars when out walking and so on. But the seeing itself cannot just be behavior, actual or potential, or we would be reducing perceptual experience to behavior and assuming in Ayer's words that we are anaesthetized.[58]

So even if the objects of perception are public, material objects which we see without the mediation of sense data or representations of sensible properties, there is a privacy to experience which again is not compatible with our understanding of the material world as accessible from the third person point of view. This, it seems to me, is a metaphysical and not just an epistemological difference although it may well have epistemological implications in certain respects. Furthermore, we are confronted with the problem of how something that is logically private in the sense described can also have as at least part of its content public objects.

[58] Ayer, A.J: *The Problem of Knowledge* (Penguin, 1956)

# Conclusion

We have seen that both the sense datum theory and representationalism fail to account for the kind of realism that is deeply embedded in our thinking, even with the assistance of the idea of semantic direct realism. Only phenomenological direct realism provides the metaphysical underpinning of our common sense realism. Moreover, phenomenological direct realism has responses to the five arguments against it. They may seem question-begging in certain respects as they themselves rest on PDR premises. Nonetheless they make sense of the phenomena adduced to justify the sense datum theory and representationalism but from within the PDR theory.

However phenomenological direct realism has some difficult conceptual issues associated with it.

Firstly how is the PDR theory going to accommodate the causality which is a central feature of PDR and crucial to answering the arguments raised against it in a context where the relationship between object and experience is also internal. Without that internal relation, PDR is vulnerable to Robinson's causal argument. And yet such a metaphysical internal relation goes against the metaphysical atomism that seems fundamental to our ideas of space, matter and causation.

Secondly, and related closely to the first problem, is the fact that perceptual experience involves the presentation of objects and their intrinsic properties to a subject which is not itself an object of that experience. This clearly relates to the internal relation between object and experience. It is the fact the object is directly present to the subject that makes the relationship between the two internal. This is reflected in the peculiarity of the acquaintance relationship which is the other side of the presentational aspect of experience. This is a relationship which has no obvious reflection in our materialist metaphysics.

Thirdly there is the logical privacy of the experience itself. It has been assumed by some that direct realism, by moving the direct objects out of the mind into the external world, would resolve a central motivation for dualism. The fact there remains a logically private experience of the object is paradoxical in terms of trying to understand how a logically private phenomenon, the perceptual experience itself, can have a public object as a constituent part of that experience. The logical privacy of the experience and the subject of that experience are also difficult to reconcile more generally with a materialist metaphysics.

One answer would be to understand the phenomenon of perceptual experience as radically emergent from a material base, but we have no idea how something so categorically different from that base could have emerged. Phenomenological direct realism, far from helping to resolve the mind-body problem, appears on the analysis propounded here to have compounded it.

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