

Philosophy 136
The Philosophy of Perception
Handout 2
Thursday, 1 September 2005

Direct versus Indirect; Immediate versus Mediate I

The general doctrine... [that] we never see otherwise perceive (or “sense”), or anyhow never directly perceive or sense, material objects (or material things), but only sense-data (or our own ideas, impressions, sensa, sense-perceptions, percepts etc.)... is a typically *scholastic* view, attributable, first, to an obsession with a few particular words, the uses of which are over-simplified, not really understood or carefully studied or correctly described; and second to an obsession with a few (and nearly always the same) half-studied “facts”. (J.L. Austin, *Sense & Sensibilia*, pp. 2-3.)

1. Some Claims about Direct Perception

But then if I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves, just as I say that I see the wax. Yet do I see more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons? I judge that there are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgement which is my mind. (Descartes, *Second Meditation*.)

For instance, when I hear a coach drive along the streets, immediately I perceive only the sound; but, from the experience I have had that such a sound is connected with a coach, I am said to hear the coach. It is nevertheless evident that, in truth and strictness, nothing can be *heard* but *sound*; and the coach is not then properly perceived by sense, but suggested from experience. (George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous, First Dialogue*, 468)

Nobody will suppose, for a moment, that when he judges such things as “This is a sofa”, or “This is a tree”, he is judging, with regard to the presented object, about which his judgment plainly is, that it is the whole sofa or a whole tree: he can, at most, suppose that he is judging it to be part of the surface of a sofa or a part of the surface of a tree. (G.E. Moore, ‘Some Judgments of Perception’, p.10 in Swartz *Perceiving, Sensing & Knowing* (CalUP: 1966).)

If you press a plain man with questions, you will easily get him to admit that all that he literally *sees* at any one moment is a *limited part* of the *outer surface* of a certain body. (C.D. Broad, ‘Some Elementary Reflexions on Sense-Perception’, p.31 in Swartz volume.)

We commonly see things in virtue of seeing *other* things: I see the aircraft flying overhead in virtue of seeing its underside (and the aircraft is not identical with its underside); I see the table I am writing on in virtue of seeing its top; I first see England on the cross-channel ferry in virtue of seeing the white cliffs of Dover... (F. Jackson, *Perception*, p.19.)

2. Is there just one distinction between ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’?

“directly” takes whatever sense it has from the contrast with its opposite: while “indirectly” itself (a) has a use only in special cases, and also (b) has *different* uses in different cases—though that doesn’t mean, of course, that there is not a good reason why we should use the same word. (J.L. Austin, *Sense & Sensibilia*, p.15.)

What is it to have a direct flight to the East Coast?

What is it to give someone 10 dollars directly?

3. Objects of Perception and the Immediate Objects of the Senses

I call special-object whatever cannot be perceived by another sense, and about which it is impossible to be deceived, e.g. sight has colour, hearing sound, and taste flavour, while touch has many varieties of object. But at any rate each judges about these, and is not deceived as to the fact that there is colour or sound, but rather as to what or where the coloured thing is or as to what or where the object which sounds is. (*De Anima*, 418^a11)

Compare odours, tastes and sounds.

Do we think of colours and light in the same way?

What would the proper object of touch?

4. Philosophical Accounts of Direct/Indirect and Immediate/Mediate

(A) Direct Perception as Perception without Inference

x directly perceives y iff x perceives y without inference
(cf. the quotations from Descartes and Berkeley)

Are we concerned with *objects* of perception or *facts* perceived?

- (i) Mary saw the china dog
 - (ii) Jane could see that the china dog was to the left of the Barbie doll
- What is the connection between *object* and *fact* perception? (A question from last time.)

One may see an object and see that something is true concerning it without inference but know something else only as the result of inference.

If we define the direct/indirect distinction for the *objects* of perception, we cannot define it directly in terms of what facts we do or do not perceive.

Secondly, if direct perception is supposed to give us an advantage with respect to knowledge or justification this should be a *consequence* of direct perception, not definitional of it.

(B) Immediate Perception and Perceiving x in virtue of perceiving y

$\dots x$ is a *mediate object of (visual) perception* (for S at t) iff S sees x at t , and there is a y such that ($x \neq y$ and) S sees x in virtue of seeing y . An *immediate object of perception* is one that is not mediate; and we can define the relation of *immediately perceiving* thus: S immediately perceives x at t iff x is an immediate object of perception for S at t ... (F. Jackson, *Perception: A Representative Theory*, pp.19-20.)

a.) what does 'in virtue of' mean here?

Some other examples:

- (iii) John broke the law *in virtue of* poisoning the vicar's cup of tea
- (iv) Scott is located in the United Kingdom *in virtue of* being located in London
- (v) Rosemary is taller than Geraldine *in virtue of* Rosemary being five foot eleven inches and Geraldine being five foot ten inches

In all of these cases there seems to be a *non-causal* connection between facts—the holding of one fact is constituted, or non-causally depends, on the obtaining of another fact.

Contrast:

- (vi) The window broke *in virtue of* the hardness of the ball

Jackson's definition is looking for a non-causal and constitutive connection between seeing one thing and seeing another.

Note that Jackson tries to explain it in terms of definition. But this is too restrictive—there is no definition which can give of breaking the law which shows why poisoning is definitionally a way of breaking the law.

Jackson's idea is that we think that we perceive some objects in virtue of having perceived distinct objects. The immediate objects of perception are those we simply perceive; the mediate objects of perception are those perceived in virtue of perceiving something else.

b.) Applying the definition

Jackson's definition is well-formed. But we can apply it to the world only if we can find cases of perceiving some things in virtue of perceiving others. Are there such cases?

Cf. again:

We commonly see things in virtue of seeing *other* things: I see the aircraft flying overhead in virtue of seeing its underside (and the aircraft is not identical with its underside); I see the table I am writing on in virtue of seeing its top; I first see England on the cross-channel ferry in virtue of seeing the white cliffs of Dover... (F. Jackson, *Perception*, p.19.)

Is it so obvious that this is so?

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