

1-2004

The Direct/Indirect Distinction in Contemporary Philosophy of Perception

William Fish
Massey University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.pacificu.edu/eip>

 Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fish, William (2004) "The Direct/Indirect Distinction in Contemporary Philosophy of Perception," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Essays in Philosophy

A Biannual Journal

Vol. 5 No. 1, January 2004

The Direct/Indirect Distinction in Contemporary Philosophy of Perception

The distinction between “direct” and “indirect” theories of perception has had somewhat of a chequered history. There was a time when to call a theory of perception a version of “direct realism” was almost equivalent to calling it “hopelessly naïve”. Time has told, however, that it was this assumption which was naïve, and nowadays the majority of theories on the market like to see themselves as direct realist. Interestingly, however, when we consider the way the complement term “indirect” has come to be employed in contemporary philosophy of perception, we find that the pendulum has swung almost completely the other way. Now, to call a theory “indirect” seems to have become pejorative. But I suggest that this preconception is just as misguided as the one it has replaced. In this paper, I firstly argue that if we take the time to get clear about the theoretical basis of the direct/indirect distinction, we find that a number of promising contemporary theories of perception are in fact properly classified as indirect. I then go on to show, in the light of this, exactly what would be required for a theory of perception to qualify as a version of direct realism.

1. Roughing out the Distinction

This paper is centrally concerned with the use of the direct/indirect distinction as a way of categorising or classifying theories of perception. If we are to use it in this way, we need a way of determining under which arm of the distinction a particular theory falls. What is more, if the role it is going to play in our thinking about these issues is to be useful, then its application should be based upon some *significant* aspect of a theory’s theoretical commitments – for example, the particular arm of the distinction a theory falls under might serve to draw our attention to the presence or absence of a theoretically relevant feature of the theory.

The task of attempting to provide a clear characterisation of the distinction is of course complicated by the fact that, in trying to define this distinction, one wants to remain faithful to its historical usage – in my attempts to outline a characterisation of the direct/indirect distinction I don’t want to be seen to be creating a new distinction, but to be formalising an intuitive distinction which has been around for a long time in the philosophy of perception. But of course, as the very fact that this task needs to be attempted in the first place implies that all previous attempts are unsatisfactory to some extent, this creates an obvious tension. Given this, I will attempt to remain faithful to the distinction’s historical roots by investigating the way in which its earliest employers – the sense-datum theorists – utilised it, and thereby revealing the underlying nature of the distinction as they (although maybe not always completely clearly) conceived it.

The most prominent feature of these classic examples of indirect theories is that they postulate the existence of some other component – in these cases the mental¹ objects known as sense-data – at the heart of the perceptual relation. And when we look at the relationship we, as subjects, are held to bear

towards these mental items, we find that our knowledge of them is claimed to be, in some sense to be further explained, *privileged* in respect to our knowledge of worldly material objects. For example, Price argues that, if it seems to him as though he is seeing a tomato, whilst it is open to doubt that there really is a tomato he is seeing, he *cannot* doubt that “there exists a red patch of a round and somewhat bulgy shape [...] and that this whole field of colour is directly present to [his] consciousness”.² On a closely related line, Berkeley says that it is “a manifest contradiction” to suppose that a man could be wrong about what he immediately or directly perceives – the implication being that, as we can be mistaken about the existence and nature of physical objects, we don’t perceive them directly.³

The general structure of these pro-sense-data arguments is as follows. We begin by noting that our perceptually-based knowledge of how things are *in our experiences* seems to be epistemically far more secure than our perceptually-based knowledge of how things are *in the world*. This epistemic security is then explained by these theorists with the suggestion that perception puts us in an epistemically privileged position with respect to a certain class of perceptible objects – the sense-data. So essentially we find two things which stand out about the indirect sense-datum theories. First, that there is an important *epistemic asymmetry* at the heart of the perceptual relation. Second that this is explained by the fact that there are mental objects involved in the perceptual relation.

Now, it might seem that what makes such a theory indirect is simply that it postulates the existence of mental objects – the reason being that the mental objects might seem to, in some sense, *get in the way* of the worldly material objects themselves. If we directly perceive mental objects, then it can seem as though this thereby *blocks* the mind’s powers from reaching all the way to the world. And if we do think that this is the critical application condition for the distinction, we can see why most contemporary theorists class their theories as direct – because very few theories these days are committed to mental objects – and in turn why calling a theory indirect has taken on a somewhat pejorative edge.

However, it has been argued that, if this is all there is to a theory’s being indirect, it seems very easy to avoid:

All one has to do to be a direct realist (in *this* sense) ... is to say, “We don’t *perceive* visual experiences, we *have* them.” A simple linguistic reform, and *voilà!* one is a direct realist.⁴

And if we think about it, it is not *simply* the existence of sense-data which justifies a theory’s being categorised as indirect – after all, we wouldn’t class Berkeleyan Idealism as indirect – an indirect theory requires *both* sense-data and material objects. But then we ought to ask ourselves why positing material objects *as well as* sense-data should serve to make a theory indirect? What makes the difference is that when we have *both* sense-data and material objects, we have two independent components of the perceptual relation, and our knowledge of one component – the mental sense-data – is then held to be *superior* to our knowledge of the other – the external objects.

So in sum, I am claiming that the crucial theoretical element of these paradigmatically *indirect* theories is not simply that they postulate mental objects, but rather that, because of this, our epistemic access to material objects is, in some sense, *sub-optimal*. In other words, what is important is that the sense-datum theories contain an epistemic asymmetry. The direct/indirect distinction can then be used to highlight the presence or absence of such an asymmetry – any theory of perception which posits such an epistemic asymmetry in the perceptual relation is an indirect *theory*.⁵

2. Filling in the Detail

The purpose of the previous section was to try and get a rough idea of how the version of the direct/indirect distinction we are currently concerned with – the distinction as a way of classifying and categorising theories of perception – had been applied in the past. What we found, in essence, was that if a theory of perception postulates some kind of epistemic asymmetry at the heart of the perceptual relation, it thereby qualifies as indirect. But it is also important to note that different sense-datum theorists offered different analyses of the asymmetry – Mill, for example, cast it not in terms of certainty compared to dubitability, but rather in terms of knowledge gained non-inferentially compared to knowledge gained inferentially.⁶ So if we are to get clear on the question of whether the distinction still has an application in contemporary philosophy of perception, it will be worthwhile to spend some time trying to reveal the fundamental character that the epistemic asymmetries postulated by these theories have in common.

I will approach this by considering the apparently innocent (and indisputable) thought that whenever we see a physical object, we see it by seeing that part of its surface which faces us. However, although it seems innocent, it has been argued that the claim about perceiving objects via their surfaces shows that our perception of opaque material objects is indirect.

Consider seeing an apple. [...] It is clear that it is not the apple as a whole which acts upon the eyes to produce these perceptions. If, for example, the back half of the apple had been cut away, this would have had no effect upon the resultant perception. [...] Furthermore, we could obviously pare away a good deal more of the apple and yet the object left might still have exactly the same perceptual effect. [...] If we consider these facts, there seems to be a clear sense in which when, as we say, somebody sees an apple, then ‘in truth and strictness’ as Berkeley would put it, they see something far less.⁷

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 [...] and so on and so forth. [...] It follows, therefore, that I see *an* opaque physical object in virtue of seeing *a* part of it.⁸

What these two extracts are suggesting is that, although we are pre-theoretically happy to *say* that we see a particular physical object, “in truth and strictness” we actually see its facing surface and we see the object itself “in virtue of” seeing that facing surface. But given that Jackson then goes on to use the “in virtue of” locution to define indirect perception⁹ this would mean that our perception of physical objects is indirect. But can the apparently indisputable fact that we see objects in virtue of seeing their surfaces really have the consequence that we don’t see physical objects directly?

To investigate this, let us accept, for present purposes, the premiss that we see objects in virtue of seeing their facing surfaces. If this is to ground the claim that we perceive opaque physical objects indirectly, then the “in virtue of” locution contained in this premiss would need to draw attention to some kind of epistemic asymmetry in order to make the direct/indirect distinction applicable. Yet when we look at some of the examples Jackson uses to illustrate the “in virtue of” locution, we find that they do not disclose any epistemic asymmetry whatsoever. For example, consider one of the analogies Jackson uses to illustrate the underlying concept: “I [Jackson] live in Australia in virtue of living in Melbourne”.¹⁰ If

the “in virtue of” locution illustrated here is to be sufficient to ground the direct/indirect distinction, then it should provide for some kind of epistemic asymmetry, but on the face of it there isn’t any sense in which his living in Melbourne is epistemically any more secure than his living in Australia. Imagine I also live in Australia, but not in any big city – in fact, I am nomadic – I therefore cannot be said to live in Australia in virtue of living anywhere else. But surely this cannot mean my living in Australia is more immediate than Jackson’s. We both live in Australia; it just so happens that he lives in Melbourne.¹¹ Instead I suggest that, on the most natural way of understanding the situation, Jackson’s living in Melbourne and his living in Australia are just two ways of describing a particular state of affairs and that neither carries any kind of priority. Jackson lives in *both* Melbourne and Australia; his living in Melbourne and his living in Australia are of the same order – his living in one isn’t, in any theoretically telling sense, dependent upon his living in the other.

Although it is both linguistically available and, in a sense, *true* to say that he lives in Australia in virtue of living in Melbourne, this is simply because, in everyday language, the “in virtue of” locution is innocuous. But as the above example shows, if all we have is this innocent sense, then it does not provide any kind of epistemic asymmetry on which to ground the direct/indirect distinction. So if we were to read the “in virtue of” locution in this way in the perceptual case, then all we would be committed to would be the claim that seeing a physical object and seeing its facing surface are two different ways of describing a particular state of affairs. And importantly, as with the Melbourne/Australia case, we would not be committed to holding that either carries any kind of priority. On this reading we could, *in truth and strictness*, be said to see *both* the object and its surface – seeing an object and seeing its facing surface are of the same order and my seeing one isn’t, in any theoretically telling sense, dependent upon my seeing the other.

Yet when we look back at the quote from Armstrong above, it looks very much like he thinks there *is* an important asymmetry between our perception of objects and our perception of their surfaces. There he claimed that when we naturally say that “somebody sees an apple, then ‘in truth and strictness’ as Berkeley would put it, they see something far less”. The implication here is that, if we are concerned about truth and strictness (as we surely should be when doing philosophy), we *don’t* really see apples, but merely apple surfaces. And whilst this is most obvious in the passage from Armstrong, it applies to Jackson equally – table-tops, aircraft-undersides, or apple-fronts are held to be given in a way in which tables, aircraft or apples themselves are not.

3. The Essence of the Distinction

So if the “in virtue of” locution is going to provide the kind of epistemic asymmetry that Armstrong and Jackson appear to think it does (and thereby serve to ground the indirect/direct distinction), then it must have an alternative – what I will call “theoretical” – sense. But of course, we now need to find out just what this “theoretical” sense *is*: what makes it appropriate to say, in this theoretical sense, that we are aware of *x* in virtue of our awareness of *y*? And what is it *about* this theoretical sense which creates an epistemic asymmetry? Answering these questions will take us towards the heart of the direct/indirect distinction.

Consider once more Armstrong’s claim that when we perceive an object we actually, in truth and strictness, perceive something far less – that part of the object’s surface which is currently facing us. This is essentially the same claim that Jackson makes when he says that we never *immediately* perceive a physical object, only ever that part of its surface which faces us, and we thereby perceive the object in

virtue of perceiving its surface. The underlying structure of these arguments is as follows. When we (as we would pre-theoretically say) perceive an apple, what we actually perceive *in truth and strictness* is merely a part of the apple's surface. The "in truth and strictness" consideration is key – whilst a *natural* characterization of the experience is an experience of an apple, the *canonical characterization*¹² of the experience – the proper philosophical characterization of the experience; what we should say the experience is if we are concerned about "truth and strictness" – is an experience of a certain kind of surface. Although in normal circumstances our having such an experience (canonically characterized) suffices for us to be seeing apples, we can imagine situations in which this isn't the case. Recall Armstrong's claim that, if "the back half of the apple had been cut away, this would have had no effect upon the resultant perception". The thought is that the perception would have remained the same – that we would still have had *the same experience* (an experience whose canonical characterization was the same) – even in situations where there was only the surface there, for example if the back half of the apple had been cut away, or if the majority had been scooped out to leave only that part of its skin which faced us.

Jackson also makes something like this assumption in other of his non-perceptual illustrations of the "in virtue of" locution. When explaining his example of a car's touching the curb *in virtue of* its front tire touching the curb, he makes it clear that 'no car can touch the curb without a part of it, the front tire, say, doing so; but the front tire *can* touch the curb without the car doing so, for it might be detached from the car'.¹³ What seems to be important is that a kind of state of affairs which might be characterized as a front-tire-touching-curb state of affairs *may or may not* constitute a car-touching-curb state of affairs. Whether it does or not depends upon the other relationships – relationships that do not alter the underlying *kind* of state of affairs it is – it enters into. This seems to me to incorporate the theoretical assumption we found in Armstrong: that we might have had the same state of affairs (canonically characterized as a front-tire-touching-curb state of affairs) which, in normal circumstances constitutes a car touching a curb, *even if there had not thereby been a car touching a curb*. With this theoretical loading made explicit, we might define the theoretical version of the "in virtue of" locution as follows: X ys in virtue of p *only if* p could otherwise have obtained, and p's obtaining would not thereby have constituted Xs ying. This is in contrast to the innocent version of the locution whereby X can y in virtue of p (live in Australia in virtue of living in Melbourne), even if it would have been impossible for p to obtain, and X to not have thereby yed (e.g. he couldn't have lived in Melbourne without thereby having lived in Australia).¹⁴

So, according to this strict version, we can only say that a car touches the curb *in virtue of* its front tire touching the curb *if* its front tire could have touched the curb and that not thereby constituted the car's touching the curb. Where perception is concerned, we might likewise say that we only perceive a material object *in virtue of* perceiving a portion of its surface *if* perceiving a portion of its surface is the sort of experience we could have had even in those situations in which we fail to actually perceive the object itself. If we couldn't have had an experience of this kind had we *not* thereby perceived the object, then there is no reason to say (in this theoretical sense) that we perceive the object *in virtue of* anything at all – we just perceive the object.

The key to this picture is that in both what we would normally call the veridical cases (those in which we successfully perceive an apple) and the non-veridical cases (those in which we get it wrong as there is only a hollowed-out apple shell), the experience we are having is an experience *of the very same kind* – in both cases the experience is canonically characterized as an experience of a certain kind of surface.

This, I suggest, is the underlying theoretical basis of the direct/indirect distinction – what makes a theory indirect is the fact that the canonical characterizations of veridical perceptual experiences are such that experiences *of the very same kind* can be enjoyed even when the experience’s apparent object is absent. If we apply this to the case of sense-data, we can see how this works. On a sense-datum theory, perceptual experiences are canonically characterized as sensings of certain collections of sense-data – when we perceive a red apple, for example, the perceptual state we are in would be canonically characterized as the sensing of red, apple-shaped sense-data. And as a hallucination of a red apple is explained as the sensing of red, apple-shaped sense-data *in the absence of* a real physical red apple, we can see that in both the veridical and the non-veridical cases, the subject is held to have experiences of the same canonical kind.

This enables us to see why there will always be a suitable epistemic asymmetry in any indirect theory. Although I may not know whether I’m perceiving or hallucinating, and hence do not know whether or not there is a red apple in front of me, I do at least know what kind of state I’m in – I’m in a perceptual state in which *it appears to me* as though there is a red apple in front of me. An epistemic asymmetry is guaranteed by the fact that I can be in a perceptual state of a certain canonical kind in both cases where there is an object corresponding to my perception and cases in which there is not. In other words, my knowledge of the perceptual state I am in will always be more secure than my knowledge of the material objects that the state purports to be about because my being in a particular perceptual state (canonically characterized) does not entail the existence of its (pre-theoretic) object.¹⁵

4. The Distinction Applied to Contemporary Theories of Perception

If this is the essence of the direct/indirect distinction, then it has the notable result that the broad range of what I will call *non-disjunctive* theories of perception – a range which includes many contemporary intentional/representational theories as well as sense-datum theories, adverbialist theories, and epistemic theories – turn out to be indirect.¹⁶ Given that many of those who espouse such theories take themselves to be offering variants of direct realism, this claim may raise a few eyebrows. I shall therefore conclude firstly by explaining what, given this analysis of the direct/indirect distinction, could possibly constitute a theory of *direct* perception, and then go on to justify the claim that such a theory is in an important sense more direct than the kinds of theories listed above.

My suggestion, recall, is that the core of the direct/indirect distinction is that a theory qualifies as indirect so long as it says that we are in the same perceptual state (canonically characterized) in both veridical and non-veridical scenarios. The direct theorist must therefore claim, contrary to this, that the kind of experience we have when we successfully perceive an apple must be an experience of a kind which we could *only* have in the presence of an apple – this would constitute *direct* perception of an apple. Of course, given the possibility of hallucinations which are subjectively indistinguishable from veridical perceptions, the direct theorist must therefore accept that the *canonical characterizations* of subjectively indistinguishable experiences – the proper philosophical “in truth and strictness” characterizations – might differ from one another.

In essence, a direct theorist must reject the claim that first-person indistinguishability entails identity of experiential kind. This is the view of those who hold a disjunctive theory of perception.¹⁷ These theorists hold that appearance statements such as ‘it looks to S as though she perceives an object O’ should be understood *disjunctively* – i.e. as elliptic for ‘*either* S perceives O, *or* it merely seems to her as if that

were so'. This enables the disjunctivist to hold that even though cases of perception and hallucination may be indistinguishable for their subject, the subject is nevertheless in *different* (canonically characterized) mental states in each case.¹⁸ And by making this move, the disjunctivist thereby removes the epistemic asymmetry which characterized the range of non-disjunctive theories as I can no longer tell, from the first-person perspective, which canonical kind of mental state I'm in. So on the disjunctive theory, my knowledge of my mental state is found to be on a par with my knowledge of the material objects.

However, it may be argued that, even if there is an epistemic asymmetry in non-disjunctive theories, the asymmetry is merely that our knowledge of our perceptual states is *more secure* than our knowledge of external objects. Although disjunctive theories do not have such an asymmetry, this is not because our knowledge of external objects is any *better* than in the non-disjunctive case, but simply because our knowledge of our own mental states is *worse!* But given this, although there is a theoretical difference between disjunctive and non-disjunctive theories of perception, it still remains to defend the suggestion that non-disjunctive theories are, in an important sense, less "direct" than the alternatives.

My project for the remainder of this paper, therefore, is to explain one way in which non-disjunctive theories can be seen to be less "direct" than their disjunctive counterparts. In some of the literature on disjunctivism, we find some fairly vague claims which suggest that non-disjunctive theories are not direct *enough*. For example, Putnam objects that, if such theories are correct, it would have the consequence that "our cognitive powers do not reach all the way to the objects themselves".¹⁹ My approach in the rest of the paper will be to try and clarify this claim and thereby explain one sense in which non-disjunctive theories can be seen to be less direct than disjunctive theories. I say "clarify" this claim because in my view neither Putnam nor McDowell really makes it clear in precisely what way our cognitive powers are supposed to fail to reach the world. However, I think there is such a way, and that when this is made explicit, we will see that it lends support to the claim that non-disjunctive theories are not as direct as disjunctive theories.

The first stage of this task is to define the notion of *phenomenological presence*. This notion is introduced by McCulloch, who asks us to contrast *seeing* a blackbird with *merely thinking about* one (without visualising it). A key difference between the two scenarios is that in the former, but not the latter, "one's consciousness is confronted by the blackbird and its visual properties".²⁰ What McCulloch is trying to pick up on here is the common thought that in perception, certain visual properties are given to consciousness in a particularly direct way. This direct kind of presence to consciousness is what he calls *phenomenological presence* as the properties are given *in the experience's phenomenology*.

For example, consider a perception of a red apple. When we actually see an apple, the colour of the apple – its redness – is given to us in the experience's phenomenology. So when we perceive a red apple, redness is phenomenologically present. And as non-disjunctive theories tell us that perceptions and hallucinations can have the same phenomenology – they can be phenomenologically identical – then redness would likewise be phenomenologically present if we were to have an indistinguishable hallucination of a red apple. Now, if we concentrate on this hallucinatory case, we might ask what explains the phenomenological presence of redness. In response to such a question, the non-disjunctivist will say that, in such a case, the subject of the hallucination is in a particular "sensory state"²¹ and that it is the subject's being in this state which explains *why* redness is phenomenologically present. But there is a further question which might be asked here: *why* does being in that kind of state suffice to make

redness phenomenologically present? It is one thing to say that a property is phenomenologically present *because* the subject is in state S, it is another altogether to explain *why* being in state S suffices to make that property phenomenologically present. Note also that this is not the thin causal question of *why the subject comes to be in state S* – that is a question about the aetiology of the state – here we are interested in what I will call the “deep” explanatory question of *why state S has the phenomenology it does*.

Of course, the deep explanations offered will differ according to the non-disjunctive theory in question. For example, sense-datum theorists would say that redness is phenomenologically present because the subject is sensing a red sense-datum, adverbialists by postulating that the subject is in a state of sensing-redly, whilst representationalists may offer the explanation that the subject is in a state which represents (in part) the presence of a red apple in the subject’s immediate environment. But the detail here is not important to the argument – all that is needed is the general idea of what kind of thing we are looking for when this sort of deep explanation is demanded. So whatever the details of the deep explanation turn out to be for the various non-disjunctive theories, they must (as the case is, *ex hypothesi*, hallucinatory) deep-explain the phenomenological presence of redness without requiring redness to be present to the senses.

So, on the non-disjunctive view, when we hallucinate a red apple we enter a certain sensory state S. The reason redness is phenomenologically present is *because* we are in state S, and there is some explanatory story to tell about state S which would deep-explain *why* being in state S suffices to make redness phenomenologically present. If we now turn our attention to the associated (i.e. indistinguishable) perceptual case when we actually *see* a red apple, in this case, redness is not only *phenomenologically* present, but also *perceptually* present – there is a real-world instance of redness acting on the subject’s sense organs. What explains the phenomenological presence of redness in the perceptual case? As we saw earlier, according to the tenets of the non-disjunctive view, the perceiving subject will be in *the same* (canonically characterized) sensory state – state S – as his hallucinatory counterpart. And as one of the prevailing motivations behind the non-disjunctive view is to explain the phenomenological similarity of perception and hallucination, we should expect the fact that the subject is in *the same* sensory state to explain the phenomenological similarity. So on this account, the reason redness is phenomenologically present is because the subject is in state S, and the deep explanation of the phenomenological presence of redness in the perceptual case will therefore be the same as it was for the hallucinatory case. For example, even in the perceptual case, a sense-datum theorist will explain the phenomenological presence of redness by appealing to the subject’s sensing of a red sense-datum, and likewise for the other non-disjunctive theories. But of course, as we saw above, this deep explanation is independent of the existence of any particular instances of redness in the world, and hence independent of the perceptual presence of redness.²²

So I suggest that we interpret Putnam’s objection in the following way. When we say that, on non-disjunctive theories, our cognitive powers fail to reach all the way to the world, what we are saying is something like the following: On non-disjunctive views, in perceptual cases, the presence to the senses of certain visual properties – their perceptual presence – does not deep-explain why those properties are phenomenologically present. We normally think, when we experience someone wearing a vivid green shirt, that the reason we have an experience *of green* is explained (in a stronger sense than mere causal explanation) by the fact that *the shirt is green* – it is the greenness *of the shirt* which is phenomenologically present. The mind-world relationship espoused by non-disjunctive theorists doesn’t seem able to accommodate the kind of direct connection which appears to exist between consciousness and the world.

This line of thought, then, offers us what seems to be a plausible criterion for a *direct* realism (certainly for a direct realism of the form Putnam and McDowell seem to have in mind): In perception, the deep explanation of the phenomenological presence of visual property *p* must contain an indispensable appeal to *p*'s perceptual presence. And as before, disjunctive theories appear to offer, if not a deep explanation of this kind, at least a framework in which this kind of deep explanation might be reachable. As, on the disjunctive view, perceiving and hallucinating subjects are in *different* canonically characterized states, there is then scope for the deep explanation of the phenomenological presence of *p* in the perceptual case to *differ* from the deep explanation for its presence in the hallucinatory case. This then opens the door for the deep explanation in the perceptual case to appeal to the perceptual presence of the property in question.

Of course, as I hope I have made clear, on the reading of the distinction I have proposed, indirect theories do not (necessarily – of course they *may*) involve a “veil of perception” of any sort – it is a consequence of this way of understanding the distinction that an indirect theory need not be committed to the existence of indirect objects of perception which may seem to “hide” objects from us. So calling a theory “indirect” should not, I maintain, carry with it any negative connotations which may have been associated with it for these reasons. And it may well be, therefore, that some version of a non-disjunctive theory such as the representational theory turns out to be the best theory of perception we have. All this paper aims to show is that, if that were the case, our best theory of perception would fall into a category which is justifiably, but non-pejoratively, known as “indirect realism”.²³

William Fish
Massey University

Notes

1. Although on a definitional level, the question of whether sense-data are mental or physical is often left open (see, e.g. Price, H.H. (1932) *Perception* (London: Methuen) at p.3; Moore, G.E. (1942) Reply to my Critics in Schlipp (ed.) *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press) at p.639), as most sense-datum theorists go on to argue that sense-data are mental objects, and as current usage of the term “sense-data” seems to take it as equivalent to mental object of perception, I shall restrict my usage of the term in this way.

2. Price *ibid.* p.3.

3. Berkeley (1713) *Principles of Human Knowledge and Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, ed. R. Woolhouse (1988) (London: Penguin Books Ltd) Third dialogue.

4. Putnam, H. (1994) “Sense, Nonsense and the Senses: An Inquiry into the Powers of the Human Mind” *The Journal of Philosophy* 91:9, 445-517 at p.453. See also Nelson, J.O. (1964) “An Examination of D.M. Armstrong’s Theory of Perception” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, pp.154-160 at §5, and Goldman, A.H. “Appearing as Irreducible in Perception” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (1976) pp.147-164, at pp.161-2.

5. It is worth pointing out that the distinction has also been applied in a subtly, yet importantly, different way. In this alternative application, each arm of the distinction names a different component of the

theorised perceptual relation: those components (the sense-data) which hold the privileged epistemic position are called the “direct” objects of perception, and worldly, material objects – our knowledge of which is, on such views, inferior – are known as “indirect” objects.

6. See, e.g., Mill, J.S. (1843) *A System of Logic* (London: Longmans) at ch.1 §2.

7. Armstrong *ibid.* at p.87.

8. Jackson *ibid.* at p.19.

9. *ibid.* at pp.19-20.

10. *ibid.* at p.18.

11. I don't think it affects the point I am trying to make that, as it happens, at any given point I must (given the way Australia is divided up into territories) be living in a particular state – say Western Australia. Not only would it be odd to make a philosophical point ride on a highly contingent matter of how a country is divided up into administrative areas, but we could make the same point about the particular states Jackson and I lived in. My living in WA would be immediate, whilst Jackson's living in Victoria would be mediated by his living in Melbourne.

12. c.f. Cussins, A. (1990) “The Connectionist Construction of Concepts” in M.A. Boden (ed.) *The Philosophy of Artificial Intelligence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 368-440.

13. *ibid.* at p.18, my emphasis.

14. This is not to say that we cannot read the claim that Jackson lives in Australia in virtue of living in Melbourne in the stronger sense. For example, Melbourne is a coastal city, and we could imagine that an earthquake might disconnect it from the rest of Australia, and that Melbourne would declare itself independent. Then, it might be suggested, one could live in Melbourne without thereby living in Australia. This doesn't affect my point, however. All I need to show is that we can read the “in virtue of” locution in two different ways. I need not commit myself to any one reading being the correct reading on any given occasion.

15. Note that I am not here claiming that I see my perceptual state in any sense. The relevant asymmetry is epistemic – in this case, the knowledge I have that I am in a perceptual state of a certain canonical kind is more secure than my knowledge that I am perceiving a certain physical object.

16. This result should not be wholly unexpected, given that all of the named theories are variants of the causal theory of perception, and that causal considerations are often appealed to in arguments which conclude that we never directly perceive material objects (see, e.g. Ayer *ibid.*, at pp.9-11; Moore *ibid.*, at p.641). Where representational theories are concerned, those that are revealed as indirect on this reading are those which hold that the representational content of experience is common to both illusory and veridical scenarios (see, for example, Tye, M. (1992) “Visual Qualia and Visual Content” in T. Crane (ed.) *The Contents of Experience: Essays on Perception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 158-176).

17. Theorists holding variants of a disjunctivist position include McDowell, J. (1982) “Criteria,

Defeasibility and Knowledge”, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 455-479; Snowdon, P. (1990), ‘The Objects of Perceptual Experience’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 64: 121-150, and (2002) ‘What is Realism?’ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 102 (2): 201-228; Martin, M.G.F. (2002) ‘The Transparency of Experience,’ *Mind and Language* 17 (4): 376-425. It should be noted that disjunctivists such as McDowell talk in terms of perceptions of facts, rather than perceptions of objects. On this account ‘an appearance that such-and-such is the case can be either a mere appearance or the fact that such-and-such is the case making itself perceptually manifest to someone’ (1982, p.472). For the purposes of this paper, however, I will concentrate on the object versions of disjunctivism.

18. This is intended to be a fairly anodyne definition of disjunctivism. In particular, it says nothing substantial about how the mental states in each disjunct should be understood.

19. *ibid.* For a similar objection see McDowell *ibid.*, at p.471. It is interesting to note the similarity between this objection and the concern mentioned in section 1 that sense data in some sense “block” the mind’s access to the world.

20. McCulloch, G. (1994) *Using Sartre: An Analytical Introduction to Early Sartrean Themes* (London: Routledge) at p.79.

21. Ayers, M. (2001) “What is Realism?” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 75, 91-110 at p.103. Of course, the different types of non-disjunctive theory will offer different interpretations of what it is to be in a given sensory state.

22. Of course, it is true that the perceptual presence of redness explains the phenomenological presence of redness in a sense – as this is a perceptual case, were it not for the presence of redness in the world, the subject would not have entered state S – but this is merely an instance of the kind of thin, causal explanation we distinguished from the deep explanation which is our central concern.

23. I would like to thank Scott Campbell, Michael Clark, Eros Corazza, Bob Kirk, Greg Mason and Paul Noordhof for their helpful comments on and discussions of the arguments contained in this paper.