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Indirect Realism

Locke's response to the Inconsistent Triad identified in ch. 1 is to reject

(II) Physical objects are the direct objects of perception.

Although it is quite difficult to articulate the resultant view precisely, this leads to what is historically perhaps the most familiar realist strategy.

Accordingly, there are supposed to be persisting mind-independent physical objects such as stones, tables, trees, people and other animals. This registers commitment to the first claim of the Inconsistent Triad.

(I) Physical objects are mind-independent.

The nature of perceptual experience is to be elucidated by reference to certain direct objects that are set before the mind in such experience. Thus the most fundamental characterization of any specific perceptual experience is to be given by citing, and/or describing, specific such entities. The experience in question is one of acquaintance with just those things, which identify the experience in question as the specific modification of consciousness that it is. In line with claim (III) of the Inconsistent

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Triad, such direct objects of experience are bound to be mind-dependent things that are therefore distinct from mind-independent physical objects. Still, we see and otherwise consciously perceive physical objects themselves. They are in this quite uncontroversial and theoretically neutral sense presented to us in perception. Our experiential relation with them is therefore indirect. It obtains in virtue of a direct conscious acquaintance with certain mind-dependent objects, along with the fact that the mind-independent physical objects in question are appropriately related to these mind-dependent direct objects of perception. I follow standard usage in referring to this strategy as indirect realism.

3.1 Preliminary Concerns

A standard preliminary worry about indirect realism is epistemological. If the nature of perceptual experience is constituted by the subject's acquaintance with mind-dependent direct objects distinct from mind-independent physical objects, then how is such experience supposed to constitute a source of knowledge about the presence and nature of any such physical objects themselves? The only resource available to the indirect realist in response is to cite the relation between direct and indirect objects in virtue of which a person's experiential encounter with the former purportedly constitutes her perception of the latter. This is generally supposed to have two aspects: causation and resemblance. Mind-independent physical objects of certain specific kinds and qualities are the normal causes of a person's acquaintance with appropriately resembling mind-dependent objects. When this normal explanation obtains, then she (indirectly) perceives the physical object in question.

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The objection is as follows. The fact that this normal causal explanation actually does obtain in any particular case makes no difference whatsoever to the nature of the subject's experience. For her acquaintance with just such a mind-dependent direct object is supposed to be the common element between veridical perception and appropriate illusion and hallucination. This is the primary motivation for the indirect realist's endorsement of (III) above, to accommodate the subjective similarities between veridical perception and appropriate illusion and hallucination. So the subject cannot know in any particular case that the relevant relation between direct and indirect objects of perception does indeed obtain. For all she knows in any particular case, then, she might be subject to illusion or hallucination. Thus, she can never know such things as that there actually is a mind-independent physical object of any specific kind or quality before her.

As things currently stand, this purely epistemological objection is quite inconclusive, and I myself see little hope of any fatal blow to indirect realism on these grounds alone. For two broad lines of reply are forthcoming, and appear capable of unlimited revision under pressure.

The more ambitious reply contends that a person can know, either by inference to the best explanation or by some kind of transcendental argument, that appropriately resembling mind-independent physical objects provide the normal causal explanation of her direct perceptual encounter with certain mind-dependent objects; and that this is sufficient for her experience on any particular occasion on which this is the actual

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explanation to constitute a source of knowledge about the physical objects in question.¹

The more cautious reply contends that such knowledge of normal causes is entirely unnecessary. All that is required if indirect perception along these lines is to constitute a source of knowledge about the physical world is that it be de facto true that appropriately resembling mind-independent physical objects provide the normal causal explanation of perceivers' direct experiential acquaintance with certain mind-dependent objects, which in turn prompts relatively reliable beliefs about the physical world around them. People need not be epistemologists of their own situation in order for their perceptual experience to provide them with knowledge of the physical world.²

As it turns out, both of these replies may be combined with the claim that a person is, after all, in a position to know, even on a particular occasion on which this is the case, that she is in fact perceiving the world around her, and not subject to illusion or hallucination. For if it really is correct on either ground to insist that indirect perception is a source of specific knowledge of the physical world, then subjects in any such case may infer from such knowledge, of the fact that there is a mind-

¹ See Alston (1993) and Brewer (1999, 4.2) for outlines of both of these strategies for securing our knowledge that appropriately resembling mind-independent physical objects are the normal cause of our perceptual acquaintance with certain mind-dependent objects, and also of some of their major problems. It is unnecessary to get into these details in the current context.

² This basic reliabilist idea is extremely popular in current epistemology. Nozick (1981, ch. 3) is a very influential source, although there are antecedents in Ramsey (1990a), Goldman (1967), Armstrong (1973) and others. For more recent critical discussion and defence, see Foley (1985), Sosa (1991, 2007), Plantinga (1993), Conee and Feldman (1998), Brewer, (1999, 4.1), Vogel (2000), Kvanvig (2003) and Goldman and Olsson (2008).

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independent physical object of such and such kind or quality before them, say, that they are therefore not subject to illusion or hallucination on that score. Thus, the initial objection is mistaken, not only in its conclusion that indirect realism is incompatible with perceptual knowledge of the physical world, but also in claiming that, on any particular occasion, for all the subject knows, she might be subject to illusion or hallucination.³

The situation here has all the familiar hallmarks of a philosophical standoff. One side claims that indirect realism condemns perceivers to a position in which they can never knowledgeably rule out the possibility that they are subject to illusion or hallucination. It goes on to claim that indirect realism is therefore incompatible with the status of perception as a source of specific knowledge about the mind-independent physical world. The other side insists that indirect realism is perfectly compatible with the status of perception as a source of specific knowledge about the physical world. For opponents place excessive conditions on what is to count as an adequate source of such knowledge. It goes on to claim that indirect realism therefore places reflective perceivers in a position in which they can after all know in particular cases that they are not subject to illusion or hallucination. Given the availability of these alternatives, and their elaborate and varied development in the literature, there is little hope of a conclusive refutation of indirect realism on purely epistemological grounds.

A more fundamental objection to indirect realism concerns its compatibility with the very idea of empirical content, with our capacity to grasp thoughts at all that are

³ I believe that these replies on behalf of the indirect realist are ultimately unsatisfactory; but I am inclined to make the fundamental objection on the grounds set out below rather than on a purely epistemological basis.

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genuinely about the mind-independent world around us (McDowell, 1982, 1986; Child, 1994, ch. 5; Brewer, 1999, ch. 3).⁴ According to this line of objection, thought determinately about F's depends upon either direct cognitive contact with F's or the construction of a way of thinking of F's from concepts of kinds of thing that one has (had) direct cognitive contact with. The notion of direct cognitive contact clearly requires elucidation, in the light of which this first premise of the objection is equally clearly in need of extended motivation and defence. My own critical discussion of indirect realism to follow avoids the need to take a stand on these issues, though; and my point in mentioning the current line of objection is to lead us into that discussion. So it is sufficient for present purposes to think of 'direct cognitive contact' as a placeholder for the mental relations grounding the possibility of demonstrative thought about F's, where I take it that the natural assumption would be that these include at least certain relations involved in perception and also in testimony.

This apparently offers the indirect realist two alternatives. First, it may be said that the direct cognitive contact essential for thought about F's requires acquaintance with F's themselves. In that case the indirect realist denies that we have direct cognitive contact with mind-independent physical objects. So it must be shown how we may construct a way of thinking of such things from concepts simply of the mind-independent direct objects of our perceptual experience according to the indirect realist account. The obvious proposal is that we may think of mind-independent G's, for example, descriptively, as the kinds of thing normally perceptual presented in experiences with F-type direct objects. Second, it may be said that perceptual presentation of mind-independent physical objects as the indirect realist conceives of

⁴ I draw heavily on Child's (1994, pp. 147-8) presentation of the objection in what follows.

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this itself constitutes direct cognitive contact of the kind required by the current argument for thought about them. Thus indirect perception of mind-independent physical G's itself grounds the possibility of demonstrative thought about them, without any need for our reflective descriptive conception of such things as the indirect objects of perceptions with such and such mind-dependent direct objects.

Both of these alternatives sound quite plausible on the perfectly natural assumption that the presentation to us of stones, tables, trees, animals, and so on, in perception, however exactly this is to be elucidated, provides us with a conception of what such mind-independent physical objects are, at least a very rough and provisional conception of them as something like persisting, unified, extended space occupants. Without this assumption, though, neither seems to me defensible. For, in that case, the second option clearly fails to meet what is surely a necessary condition on our possession of concepts of mind-independent physical objects, namely that we do indeed grasp at least roughly and provisionally what such objects are.⁵ This, I take it, is the whole point of the requirement for direct cognitive contact with such things as it figures in the first premise of the objection under consideration. The current variant of indirect realism asserts that this is indeed provided by perceptual presentation itself, yet, if the assumption above is unwarranted, then this is precisely what is denied. Similarly, without the assumption that perceptual presentation provides us with a conception of what mind-independent physical objects are, the recipe offered by the first option above for the construction of a descriptive way of thinking about such

⁵ There are of course philosophers who reject such conditions upon concept possession altogether, and the cognitive contact requirement intended to meet it them too, although they may insist upon various causal conditions. See, e.g., Mill (1867), Kripke (1980), Salmon (1986), Fodor (1987, 1998) and Kaplan (1989). I offer below a more direct objection to indirect realism that is not bound by any such thought-theoretic commitments.

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things on the basis of our more basic thought about the mind-dependent direct objects of perception is equally ineffectual. The proposal is that we think of certain mind-independent physical objects as the kinds of thing normally perceptual presented in experiences with F-type direct objects, say. Yet, absent the assumption in question, this actually gives us no idea whatsoever of what such things are. The crux of the current line of objection to indirect realism is therefore the contention that its own elucidation of perceptual presentation is entirely incapable of sustaining the assumption that such presentation provides us with at least a provisional conception of what mind-independent physical objects are.

Indeed, if the present objection succeeds on that basis, then on plausible further assumptions a more straightforward challenge may be made to the indirect realist strategy of rejecting (II) as elucidated above. For it is a plausible necessary condition upon any satisfactory account of perceptual presentation that this provides us with an initial conception at least of what mind-independent physical objects are. It is a necessary condition on any relation between us and the physical objects around us being genuinely one of perceptual presentation – however directly or indirectly this is ultimately philosophically to be elucidated – that it provides us with some conception of what such physical objects are. Perception of physical objects displays their nature, not in the sense that we may read a complete correct metaphysics of the physical world off our perceptual experience; but this must at least fix for us the domain that is the concern of such metaphysics. We must have a provisional conception of what mind-independent physical objects are. In that case, the crux of the current thought-theoretic objection constitutes a more straightforward challenge to indirect realism as a theory of our perceptual experiential relation with such things. So I focus the

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remaining discussion directly upon the key question whether the indirect realist account of perceptual presentation is compatible with the claim that this provides us with such a conception of what mind-independent physical objects are.

If, as I argue, it is not, then there are a number of possible responses. I myself propose that we conclude immediately that indirect realism should therefore be rejected. For I contend that any adequate account of perceptual presentation must indeed provide us as subjects of perception with at least a provisional conception of what physical objects are. I also argued above that this is a necessary condition upon any satisfactory account of the role of perceptual experience in yielding a form of cognitive contact with its objects that plausibly grounds the possibility of our thought about those very things. Of course it is open for others simply to reject this idea that perceptual presentation provides us with a genuine conception of what physical objects are altogether. Some philosophers explicitly do so.⁶ I cannot respond conclusively to all the issues raised here. Instead I offer a more explicit and nuanced statement of what I do and do not take for granted throughout my discussion, and of why I do so.

First, I claim that the basic idea that perceptual experience of physical objects provides us with a provisional conception of what such things are has powerful pre-theoretical intuitive force. This claim itself needs some unpacking. One debate in the area is between what might be called empiricism and innatism about physical object concepts. Both parties agree that we conceive of physical objects as persisting, unified, extended space occupants. The empiricist holds that this conception must,

⁶ Here I have in mind specifically Langton (1998) and Lewis (2009).

like all of our genuine concepts of anything, be derived in some way from experience. The innatist, on the other hand, holds that we are hardwired from birth, and certainly independently of any of our perceptual experience, to think about the physical world in terms of persisting, unified, extended space occupants, perhaps as a result of natural selection. My claim is not that the empiricist side of this philosophical debate is more intuitive in advance of any relevant theoretical consideration. It is rather that we have a pre-theoretical grasp of what kind of phenomenon perceiving something is. Of course this is subject to revision in the light of evidence and argument; but I claim that we at least start with the idea that something that we perceive is something whose nature is thereby at least to some extent evident to us: we have at least a rough initial conception of what kind of thing it is.⁷ As we will see, the indirect realist is explicitly driven by this idea, in the insistence that indirect perception at least displays physical objects as they are in respect of their primary qualities. My objection is that he fails in precisely this regard. The attempt is revealing though, and supports my contention that an intuitive starting point in the area is the idea that perceptual presentation provides us with a provisional conception at least of what physical objects are.⁸

⁷ I grant entirely that this claim is more immediately compelling in connection with sight and touch; but I would also insist that the nature of our own experience in the other modalities is heavily dependent upon their integration with sight and touch. What conception of the physical world, if any, might be available to imaginary perceivers entirely lacking in sight and touch is certainly an interesting question. It is nevertheless one that I do not address here. See Strawson (1959, esp. ch. 2; 1980) and Evans (1980) for seminal discussion in connection with hearing that also engages with the question to what extent to objectivity of our conception of the physical world is dependent upon its spatiality.

⁸ Notice that this intuitive conception of perception as revelatory to some extent of the nature of its objects is not independent of the empiricism/innatism debate concerning the source of our physical object concepts. For if the intuitive conception of perception is vindicated, and perceptual presentation does indeed provide us with a provisional conception of what physical objects are, then there will be correspondingly less need for any appeal to innate endowment in explanation of the evident fact that we think of physical objects as persisting, unified, extended space

Second, there is a perspective from which this idea that perceptual presentation provides us with at least our initial starting conception of what physical objects are really is non-negotiable. For it plays an absolutely fundamental role in setting the domain for the whole debate about realism. The question that we are interested in as perceivers of the physical world of stones, tables, trees, people and other animals around us, and, indeed, as philosophical theorists who are also perceivers of such things, is what the metaphysical status is of those very things: the very things of which we have our initial conception precisely through such perception. Arriving at the conclusion that some quite distinct domain of entities may be truly mind-independent, for example, is of little or no significance to us. The constraint here is not simply that the metaphysical debate should concern those things that we perceive, whatever 'perceiving' may be said to be. It is rather that our metaphysical attention is focussed from the outset precisely upon the things with which perception makes us familiar, of whose basic nature we are provided with at least a provisional conception directly on the basis of our perceptual experience of them: the very physical objects, as we might say, that we all know and love.

Third, my own positive position developed in chs. 5-7 below succeeds in my view in explaining how perception does indeed provide us with a conception of what mind-independent physical objects are in this sense. So I reject any suggestion that, regardless of its intuitive pre-theoretical appeal, it is simply not possible to accommodate this basic idea in any developed philosophical theory of the nature of

occupants. See Ayers (1993, vol. I) for development of this kind of argument in Locke against the need for innate concepts and knowledge.

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our perceptual relation with such things. This is impossible, in my view, given the third claim, (III), from my opening Inconsistent Triad. That is effectively my conclusion from chs. 2 and 3 taken together. Ch. 4 presents the familiar orthodox alternative to (III) and finds this also wanting. Chs. 5-7 develop and defend my own alternative rejection of (III) that I believe avoids all these objections and vindicates the initial intuitive idea that perceptual presentation provides us with a provisional conception of what mind-independent physical objects are.

Fourth, and relatedly, there are also more specific philosophical arguments aimed directly against this starting point. In particular, there is Lewis' argument for (HT) set out in ch. 2 above (Lewis, 2009) and Langton's Kantian argument (Langton, 1998) for a similar humility thesis that she regards as an elucidation of Kant's claim that we are irremediably ignorant of the nature of 'things-in-themselves' (Kant, 1929). I explain in ch. 7 below how I think that these arguments should be resisted. Very briefly, against Lewis I claim that my own account of perception explains how it is that we are in a position to know some at least of the relatively intrinsic properties of physical objects that play an ineliminable active role in the workings of the world directly on the basis of perception. This contradicts his premise that none of the intrinsic properties that play an active role in the actual working of the physical world are named in O-language, "except as occupants of roles" (Lewis, 2009, p. 000 (3)). Similarly against Langton's Kant I argue that the receptivity involved in our perceptual relation with mind-independent physical objects is perfectly compatible with all that is required for our knowledge of their intrinsic nature on the basis of our perception of them.

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In the light of all of this, for present purposes and in what follows, I take for granted the basic idea that the presentation to us in perception of mind-independent physical objects, whatever exactly this may involve, at least provides us with a provisional conception of what such objects are.

3.2 The Objection

On the assumption that any adequate account of perceptual presentation must indeed provide us with a provisional conception at least of what physical objects are, then, the key question is whether the indirect realist construal of perceptual presentation is capable of providing such a conception.

To make proper progress with this question we first need an explicit elucidation of the core indirect realist idea that the direct objects of perception are mind-dependent entities that are therefore distinct from the mind-independent physical objects that are nevertheless presented to us in such experiences. This is certainly not straightforward; but I begin with a relatively familiar conception of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, for example, between the shapes and colours of physical objects respectively (Locke, 1975). The approach that both seems to me faithful to the key historical arguments in the area and is in any case most useful for my purposes here characterizes this as a distinction between the relation that the relevant properties of physical objects bear to the perceptual appearances to which they may give rise in the two cases. I call this the standard account.⁹

⁹ I should say that I do not myself endorse the following characterization of secondary qualities and our perceptions of them. See Campbell (1993) for an alternative that I prefer.

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Thus, the most basic distinctions concerning secondary qualities are between, say, red-type and green-type appearances, and the rest, conceived quite independently of the question of what their worldly correlates, if any, may be. The characterization of such appearances is prior to, and independent of, any characterization of the worldly properties that may in some way be presented or indicated by them. Having given such a characterization, of red-type appearances, say, we may then define a property – redness – which applies to mind-independent objects, as that of being disposed to produce those kinds of appearances – red-type ones – or, alternatively, as the property of having whatever underlying physical constitution happens in the actual world to ground that disposition.

In contrast, the most basic distinctions concerning the primary qualities are those between, say, squareness and circularity, and the rest, as properties of mind-independent things themselves, conceived quite independently of the question of what appearances, if any, they might produce. Having first identified which property squareness is, we can then identify square-type appearances as those that present something as having that property – squareness. So, the relevant appearances are to be characterized only by appeal to a prior, and independent, characterization of the worldly properties that they may present.

Generalizing this basic idea, inline with my opening characterization of mind-independence and mind-independence set out in ch. 1 above, then, I propose that the mind-independence of the objects that we perceive consists in the individuating priority of their nature over the various appearances that show up in our perception of

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them. Correlatively, the mind-dependence of the indirect realist's direct objects of perceptual experience consists in their individuation and characterization prior to and entirely independently of the natures of any mind-independent physical objects that experiences with such direct objects may indirectly present to us. Their natures are in this way at least to some extent dependent precisely upon their appearance in those experiences. Such mind-dependent direct objects have natures that are therefore quite silent on the question of what any mind-independent objects may be that experiences with those direct objects somehow supposedly present to us.

On the assumption that there are mind-independent physical objects such as stones, tables, trees, people and other animals, the indirect realist may then go on to identify specific such things as the indirect objects of perception: the mind-independent causes of experiences with such and such kinds of mind-dependent direct objects. Thus, an experience with mind-dependent direct object d constitutes a perceptual presentation of mind-independent physical object p, very crudely, provided that it is caused by p, where this is of the kind P that normally causes experiences with direct objects of the same kind, D, as d. The central question to be considered in the remainder of the present chapter is whether this approach is really compatible with the claim that perceptual presentation provides us with a conception of what mind-independent physical objects are. I will argue that it is not.

Before proceeding with that main argument, though, it may be helpful to clarify some issues concerning my characterization of mind-independence and mind-dependence.

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First, whatever the merits may be of my elucidation of the familiar distinction between primary and secondary qualities, it is surely a further question how the distinction between mind-independence and mind-dependence is to be construed in connection with various objects. I agree that this is a further question but defend my generalization of the distinction with the insistence that the objects in question are precisely those whose natures are to be construed in terms of the very properties to which the initial distinction applies. The mind-(in)dependence of the various objects of perception that I claim is of interest to us is, or at least is of focal interest to me here, is on this account the mind-(in)dependence of their nature that provides the most fundamental answer to the question what such things are.¹⁰

Second, the concepts of mind-independence and mind-dependence in question here are in my view specific concepts that apply in a specific context. There may well be other equally legitimate concepts of mind-independence and mind-dependence that are appropriate to consider in other contexts. Here our concern is with the mind-(in)dependence of the objects of perception – direct and indirect in the case of indirect realism where such a distinction is applicable; but objects of perception throughout. These objects appear to us in various ways in our perception of them. Our fundamental question as I understand it is whether their nature is entirely independent of those appearances or whether it is in part in some way constituted by them. Thus, regardless of the possibility of other legitimate ways to understand these notions, I propose for my own concerns here and throughout to employ the concepts of the

¹⁰ See ch. 7 below for further details about the mind-independence of the physical objects that we perceive and how this is evident to the subject himself in his perceptual experience of them.

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mind-independence and mind-dependence of various objects of perception in line with the elucidation given above.¹¹

I return now to the crucial question whether the indirect realist conception of our perceptual experience as acquaintance with mind-dependent direct objects appropriately caused by mind-independent physical objects is really compatible with the claim that perceptual presentation provides us with a genuine conception of what such mind-independent physical objects are. Locke certainly thinks that it is, and the key for him consists in the resemblance between our ideas of primary qualities and those qualities in mind-independent physical objects themselves. He famously writes this:

The Ideas of Primary Qualities of Bodies, are Resemblances of them, and their Patterns do really exist in the Bodies themselves; but the Ideas, produced in us by these Secondary Qualities, have no resemblance of them at all. (Locke, 1975, I.viii.15)

And Michael Ayers develops the point on his behalf as follows.

What calls for justification ... is ... the assumption that ideas of primary qualities are more than merely causally correspondent to certain unknown attributes of things. Locke's response is his claim that the primary qualities supply our only understanding both of what external objects actually are and of what they do. (Ayers, 1997, pp. 17-18)

¹¹ I raise and respond to further questions about these notions in the context of an extended discussion of the way in which the mind-independence of the objects of perception in my view comes to light from the point of view of the subjects of perception themselves in ch. 7 below.

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The proposal is that, in virtue of this resemblance, our perception of their primary qualities somehow offers us illumination as to what physical objects are.¹² The difficulty, I argue, is that this depends upon the standard primary quality model of the relation between mind-independent physical objects and the perceptual appearances we have of them, which is inconsistent with the mind-dependence of the indirect realist's direct objects of perception that figure in such appearances. There is a contradiction at the heart of the Lockean indirect realist account of the place of primary qualities in our perceptual relation with physical objects.

Recall the standard account of primary qualities. The most basic distinctions are made between properties of mind-independent objects themselves: squareness is this shape property, and circularity that one, where these are conceived quite independently of any question what perceptual appearances such properties may produce in us. Square-type appearances are then individuated as those that present something as having this shape – squareness. So the nature of squareness itself is evident from the fundamental nature of our experience of squareness: that experience just is the kind that presents something as having just that shape. Thus, perceptual presentation provides us with a conception what mind-independent physical squares are. They are extended space

¹² The source of our knowledge and understanding as theorists of the status of our ideas of primary qualities as revelatory in this way of the natures of physical objects themselves and what they do is a delicate issue in Locke. It is unclear whether this knowledge and understanding is supposed to be derived from a priori philosophical argument and reflection upon the nature of our perceptual experience of mind-independent physical objects or from some kind of deference to the best scientific theories of the day that apparently retain the primary qualities at least in their fundamental characterization of such objects. Descartes of course clearly thought the former (1986, esp. Meditations II & V). Locke's official view may well be the latter; but there is I believe a significant residue of Cartesian rationalism in Locke's thinking in this area that leads to a certain amount of tension throughout the Essay. See Ayers (1993) for highly illuminating extended discussion of many aspects of this combination of radical empiricism with elements of rationalism in Locke.

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occupants shaped like this; and similarly for the other properties to which the standard primary quality model applies. Generalizing this basic idea, provided that the natures of the physical objects that we perceive are individuated prior to and independently of the various appearances to which they may give rise in perception, which are to be individuated precisely as the presentation of objects of those kinds, then such appearances evidently provide us with a conception of what such physical objects are: persisting, unified, extended space occupants, modified with such shapes as these, for example.

The core of the current objection is that there is a contradiction between two essential components of the indirect realist's overall position. First, the feature of the standard account of the relation between the individuation of the primary qualities of physical objects and the individuation of the perceptual appearances to which they may give rise that makes it possible to think in the required way of the perceptual presentation of physical objects as the source of our conception of what such mind-independent objects are. Second, the crucial distinction between the mind-dependent direct objects of perception and any mind-independent physical objects that may be supposed somehow to be its indirect objects. Grasp along the lines set out above of what mind-independent physical objects are depends upon the fact that appearances of physical objects on this model make absolutely evident the natures of the physical objects themselves. They do so only because the former appearances are individuated precisely in terms of the latter objects, as presentations of things as just such things. This is what the crucial resemblance thesis means here, in my view, insofar as such resemblance really is helpful in the way that Locke so clearly intends. Yet the defining feature of indirect realism as I have characterized it is a quite general

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commitment to precisely the reverse order of individuation that is associated by the standard model with the secondary qualities. Mind-dependent direct objects of perception are to be individuated and characterized prior to and entirely independently of any reference whatsoever to the natures of any mind-independent physical objects that experiences with such direct objects may indirectly present to us. Thus the natures of any mind-independent physical objects that may be identified as the causes of such experiences are absolutely not evident in any way whatsoever from the fundamental nature of those experiences. The fact that physical objects of certain kinds regularly cause experiences with one or another kind of mind-dependent direct object does nothing to explain how, on any particular occasion on which this is the case, the subject might be supposed to grasp what on earth such mind-independent objects are. Indirect realism is therefore incompatible with any appeal to resemblance along the lines set out above in explanation of how perceptual presentation provides us with even a rough provisional conception of what mind-independent physical objects are.

Two lines of responses deserve immediate consideration.

First, the standard model of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities surely offers an obvious solution for the indirect realist. According to this proposal, the order of individuation from appearances to objects in connection with secondary qualities captures the mind dependence of the direct objects of perception; and the order of individuation from objects to appearances in connection with primary qualities provides the necessary resemblance to sustain the idea that perceptual presentation provides us with a conception of what mind-independent physical objects

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are. This is indeed an orthodox reading of Locke's own version of the view (1975).¹³

It is in my view simply inconsistent though, in ways that are fundamental to his whole metaphysical and epistemological system.

The indirect realist is committed to the early modern relational approach to perceptual consciousness elucidated in ch. 1. Accordingly, the most fundamental characterization of any specific perceptual experience is to be given by citing, and/or describing, specific direct objects that we are acquainted with in perception. The identity and nature of such direct objects characterize what it is for the subject to be in just that conscious experiential state. Thus the question of the order of individuating priority between appearances and physical objects is a question of whether, on the one hand, the direct objects of perception are to be characterized prior to and entirely independently of any reference to the natures of any mind-independent objects that may be related to them, or, on the other hand, those very direct objects are essentially to be characterized only in terms of the natures of mind-independent physical objects themselves. To say, as the indirect realist definitively does, that the direct objects of perception are mind-dependent is to say that those objects are to be characterized as the specific subjective phenomena that they are without any reference to the nature of anything that may or may not exist in the mind-independent world. To insist simultaneously that the direct objects of perception are to be characterized in terms of the primary qualities of mind-independent physical objects in order to maintain the relevant resemblance thesis is simply inconsistent.

¹³ See also Baldwin (1992).

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What the indirect realist really needs at this point is appeal to something like the Cartesian distinction between the formal and objective reality of ideas (1986, III). As I understand it, the formal reality of an idea is its nature in itself as the particular modification of consciousness that it is. Its objective reality is its nature as a presentation or representation of a more or less specific (normally non-mental) worldly phenomenon: its nature as an idea of X, say. Formally speaking, according to indirect realism, perceptual experience is simply acquaintance with specific mind-dependent direct objects whose nature is to be characterized entirely independently of anything mind-independent. Objectively speaking, our acquaintance with such things nevertheless presents or represents mind-independent objects as being certain specific ways supposedly such as to ground some kind of resemblance between the two. The difficulty brought out by my argument above, though, is that, given the indirect realist's definitive account of the formal reality of perceptual experience as a matter of acquaintance with mind-dependent direct objects, the proposed account of its objective reality is absolutely incompatible with the required resemblance. According to the indirect realist, perception presents a mind-independent object, o, as E, very roughly, just if it is a case of acquaintance with a mind-dependent direct object of a type that is normally caused by mind-independent F's that is on this occasion caused by o. The mind-dependence of direct objects consists in the fact that they are typed by their nature – that is, formally – entirely independently of any question of the mind-independent nature of such normal causes. Yet the required resemblance as I have been elucidating it depends essentially upon the characterization of the very nature of perceptual appearances by reference to the specific ways that they present mind-independent physical objects as being.

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I can see two very different ways in which the Cartesian distinction has a more promising application in this context. On one, perceptual appearances are characterized as mental representations of specific ways a mind-independent world might be: this is the most fundamental way of elucidating which perceptual experience is in question. On the other, perceptual appearances are most fundamentally cases of standing in an essentially experiential relation of acquaintance with specific mind-independent physical objects themselves. Very crudely, these are the Content View (CV) and the Object View (OV) that are the topics of chs. 4 and 5 respectively. Indirect realism as I conceive of it is an explicit rejection of both. It retains the early modern approach of offering direct objects of acquaintance as characteristic of the fundamental nature of perceptual experience, rather than (CV) representations of ways a mind-independent world might be; and it insists as against (OV) that these direct objects are themselves mind-dependent entities quite distinct from any mind-independent physical objects. Thus I conclude that the orthodox Lockean version of indirect realism is absolutely untenable notwithstanding its manifest desirability at the precisely this point in the dialectic.

The second line of response to my core objection insists that the universal application of the order of individuation from properties of perceptual appearances to properties of physical objects definitive of indirect realism is perfectly compatible with an account of appearance-object resemblance adequate to sustain perceptual presentation as the source of our conception of what mind-independent physical objects are. In order to do so it adopts a generalization of a claim sometimes made on behalf of dispositional theories of secondary qualities.

Indirect Realism

According to a very crude dispositionalism, physical objects cause certain experiences in us that may be categorized purely on the basis of their subjective type, as red-type, green-type, and so on, quite independently of the question of what their worldly correlates, if any, may be. Colour properties of the physical objects themselves are then defined along the following lines. Redness is the property of being disposed to produce red-type experiences in normal subjects in normal circumstances. A question then comes up: in what sense, if at all, are red-type experiences genuinely appearances that something is red, given how redness is defined? McDowell answers rhetorically on behalf of the dispositionalist: “what would one expect it to be like to experience something’s being such as to look red if not to experience the thing in question (in the right circumstances) as looking precisely red?” (1985b, p, 112). In our terms, the claim is that having red-type experiences just is a matter of things looking red. For being red is being disposed to produce red-type experiences (in the right circumstances) and so looking red could be nothing but having red-type experiences (in the right circumstances).

Indirect realism may be construed as a generalized dispositionalism of this kind. We have perceptual experiences in which we are acquainted with various mind-dependent direct objects whose nature consists simply in being the specific subjective entities that they are, entirely neutral on what their physical causes, if any, may be. Still, physical objects are precisely the normal causes of such experiences; and, being subject to those very experiences, we are thereby presented with physical objects as whatever normally cause experiences of our acquaintance with such and such mind-dependent direct objects. “What would one expect it to be like to experience something’s being the normal cause of experiences with such and such mind-

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dependent direct objects if not to have in the right circumstances experiences with precisely those mind-dependent direct objects?" Thus, it may be contended, perceptual presentation does after all provide us with a conception of what mind-independent physical objects are.

My counter to this line of response is simply to deny that the proposed dispositionalist manoeuvre really succeeds at all in meeting the requirement that the perceptual presentation of mind-independent physical objects provides a substantial, if provisional, conception what such mind-independent objects are. Being in a position to think of physical objects simply as the causes we-know-not-what of such and such mind-dependently characterized perceptual experiences, as the current response suggests, is not yet to know in the relevant sense what mind-independent stones, tables, trees, people and other animals are. It is far harder to give an explicit characterization of precisely what is required than to assert that something fails to provide it; and I do not offer any precise such characterization here. The guiding intuition, though, is the one that surely moved Locke in his insistence that perception of such objects as bearers of the primary qualities provides us a conception of what physical objects are and what they (can) do (Locke, 1975, I.viii; Ayers, 1997, pp. 17-18). For present purposes it is sufficient to insist that perceptual presentation should be the source of something along the lines of our commonsense conception of physical objects as persisting, unified, variously extended space occupants: certainly something far more than a conception of them simply as whatever causes these sensations. The key claim is that perceptual presentation provides us with a conception of physical objects, not merely as whatever give rise to certain experiences in us and the familiar patterns amongst them, but as things evidently constituted more

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or less thus and so, in virtue of which they explanatorily do so.¹⁴ My counter to the present line of response therefore stands: the dispositionalist manoeuvre simply fails to vindicate this key claim.

I have considered two lines of response to my objection to indirect realism. Neither is in my view successful. The notion of resemblance that underwrites the idea of perceptual presentation as the source of our conception of what mind-independent physical objects are depends upon an order of individuating priority from the natures of such objects themselves to the natures of their perceptual appearances; but the indirect realist's appeal to mind-dependent direct objects of perception is committed throughout to the reverse and incompatible order of individuating priority.¹⁵

The indirect realist may reply at this point that my focus upon a conception of resemblance derived from reflection upon the order of individuation from mind-independent objects to their appearances that is characteristic of the standard model of primary qualities is entirely wrong-headed. A far more straightforward and familiar account is available. Our acquaintance with mind-dependent direct objects in perception provides us with a provisional conception of what mind-independent physical objects are because such direct objects resemble physical objects themselves in the simple sense of sharing their basic properties. The obvious counter to this reply echoes a well-known comment of Berkeley's, when he criticizes Locke's appeal to resemblance by insisting that "an idea can be like nothing but an idea" (Berkeley,

¹⁴ See ch. 7 for more on the role of physical objects as the perceptually presented explanatory grounds of the order and nature of our perceptual experience.

¹⁵ See ch. 7 also for critical discussion of a purportedly 'no-priority' view concerning the individuation of the intrinsic properties of mind-independent physical objects in relation to the various appearances that show up in our perception of them.

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1975b, § 8). Here the point would be that a mind-independent physical object can (in the relevant sense) be like nothing but a mind-independent physical object.

The goal is to explain how perception provides us with a conception of what mind-independent physical objects are. The suggestion is that this is accomplished by the direct objects of perception instantiating the very properties characteristic of physical objects themselves, by such direct objects being what physical objects are. But this is possible only if the direct objects of perception are physical objects, which is inconsistent with the indirect realist's definitive rejection of (II).

Aiming to avoid this contradiction by postulating shared properties between mind-dependent direct objects and mind-independent physical objects themselves that are not characteristic of the nature of the latter as such clearly fails. For the whole point of the exercise is to explain how such resemblance grounds the fact that perceptual presentation provides us with our crucial conception of what mind-independent physical objects are. A historically significant variant of this failed approach is to invoke higher order, or structural, properties in common between the two kinds of objects. The proposal is that mind-independent physical objects have natures that in turn have certain properties; and the natures of the mind-dependent direct objects of our perception share these higher order properties too. The obvious counter is that if the common higher order structural properties are, as proposed, common to the first order natures of mind-independent physical objects and the quite distinct mind-dependent direct objects of our perception, then they are neutral between the natures of these two kinds of objects, and indeed much else besides. So they are quite incapable of providing any substantive, even provisional, conception determinately of

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what mind-independent physical objects are. Thus, once again, the appeal to resemblance as shared properties fails.¹⁶

It is of course open to the indirect realist to offer another alternative construal of resemblance here that is compatible with the position and really does succeed in grounding an account of perceptual presentation that succeeds in providing us with a substantive provisional conception of what mind-independent physical objects are. Nothing that I know of comes even close to doing so though.

3.3 Conclusion

I conclude that indirect realism is inconsistent with the claim that perceptual presentation provides us with a conception of what mind-independent physical objects are. On the plausible assumption that any adequate account of perceptual presentation must do so, indirect realism is therefore inadequate as a theory of perception, and hence unsatisfactory as a response to the Inconsistent Triad set out in ch. 1. Even without this plausible assumption, it follows that indirect realism is unable to offer either of the two alternative responses that I set out above to the objection concerning its compatibility with the very idea of empirical content, with our capacity to grasp thoughts at all that are genuinely about the mind-independent world around us. Thus, either way, I contend, indirect realism as I understand it here is untenable.

¹⁶ For the basic idea of structural resemblance in defence of empirical realism, see Russell (1927). For the fundamental objection, see Newman (1928) and Demopoulos and Friedman (1985). There is a great deal more of interest and importance to be said about these ideas; but my discussion may be left here for present purposes.

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Furthermore, notice that the indirect realist's attempt to resolve the Inconsistent Triad set out in ch. 1 by rejecting (II) faces precisely the difficulty that I raised against all six of the metaphysical views discussed in ch. 2 in connection with Berkeley's rejection of (I). It fails to sustain the empirical realist thesis that physical objects are both the objects genuinely presented to us in perception, and things that have a nature that is entirely independent of how they do or might appear to anyone. Chs. 5-7 below develop in detail my own positive account of how exactly this empirical realism is to be sustained. In ch. 4 that follows I consider what I regard as the orthodox view in philosophy today of how empirical realism is to be maintained. Both current orthodoxy and my own position unsurprisingly involve rejecting (III); but, as always, the devil is in the detail.