NON-NAÏVE DIRECT REALISM [1]

Realismo direto não ingênuo

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to answer some main arguments against direct realism. It is based on two theses: that of the Janus face of perceptual experience, and that of the cognitive primacy of sensory content (sense data). Together they help us give better answers to the old arguments of illusion and of science against direct realism.

Key-words: direct realism. sense data. argument of illusion. philosophy of perception.

RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo responder a alguns dos principais argumentos contra o realismo direto. Baseia-se em duas teses: a da face de Janus da experiência perceptiva e a da primazia cognitiva do conteúdo sensorial (dados dos sentidos). Juntos, eles nos ajudam a dar melhores respostas aos velhos argumentos da ilusão e da ciência contra o realismo direto.

Palavras-chave: realismo direto. dados dos sentidos. argumento da ilusão. filosofia da percepção.

My intention here is to show that we can reconcile direct realism with the idea that we in some way perceive the external world through a "veil of sensations" (of sense data). It is difficult to say something really new about the classical philosophical problem of perception. Aware of this, my goal here is to highlight some points in defense of a "non-naïve" direct realism.

1. Janus Face thesis of perceptual experience

My understanding of direct realism is grounded on two theses. I can state the first now: everything experienced in normal perception has a kind

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of Janus face. That is, we can conceive the phenomenally given in sensory-perceptual experience of the outside world in two different ways (Costa 2018, 419 f.):

(A) As the psychological experience of cognitively dependent internally given *sensory contents* (more often called *sense data*).

(B) As the proper perceptual experience of cognitively-independent, externally given *perceptual contents* (understood as physically singularized entities).

Psychological experience (A) gives us what we may call sensory impressions or contents (also called sense data, sensations, sensa, qualia, ideas, phenomena…). Today it is beyond doubt that sensory contents are always present in perceptual experience. Although in the past many philosophers denied the existence of sensory contents (understood as sense data) as those sensory contents given in (A) as necessarily accompanying proper perceptual experience (B), I defend the view that today the issue has been definitively settled by neuroscience, at least regarding visual experience. The computational reconstruction of moving mental images taken with BOLD fMRI by reading brain activity first made at the University of Berkeley was able to show moving visual images formed in the brain when a person sees objects or watches a film (Gallant et al. 2016). After experiments like these, who would dare to doubt the existence of sense data accompanying perception?

However, thesis (B) also seems beyond doubt: it is the idea that in addition to sensory experience, when we perceive something, this something is given to us as an external entity. Indeed, it is also a commonsense truth to say that we usually perceive the external world as it really is, constructed of mind-independent entities like material objects and their singularized properties.

The clearest evidence favoring this double view is tactile experience (*Cf*. Searle 2015: 24). Suppose I touch a hot stove with my hand. I can say I have a sensation of heat: this sensory-impression is the psychological internal sensory-content of experience (A). Alternatively, and correctly, I can also say that I have perceived that the stove in itself is hot; this is the correct perceptual experience of the externally given physical entity (B). The essen-

tial to be noticed in this example is that in the normal case we are unable, as John Searle would note, to *phenomenally* distinguish experience (A) from experience (B). The content seems to be the same, though differently understood. Thus, in a similar way I can say:

(A) [I feel that] I am holding a tennis ball in my hand.

(B) I am holding a tennis ball in my hand.

Now, of auditory experience, I can say:

(A) [I have the auditory impression that] I hear thunder.

(B) I hear thunder.

And of the most common visual experience, I can also say:

(A) [I have the visual impression that] I am seeing a fishing boat entering the mouth of Pirangi River.

(B) I am seeing a fishing boat entering the mouth of Pirangi River.

As you can see, the phenomenal descriptions outside the brackets are the same, but in the (A) cases, I speak of sensory contents occurring in my head (sense data), while in the (B) cases, I speak of independent factual contents pre-existing in the external world. The real thing (B) is cognitively dependent on sense impressions (A), since without (A) I couldn't know (B). On the other hand, sense impressions (A) are causally dependent on (B), which causes (A). These conclusions lead us to our second thesis.

2. Thesis of the cognitive primacy of sensory content

Along with the thesis of the Janus face of content in the case of real perception, I will defend the epistemic thesis of *a cognitive primacy of sensory content*. The conditions in which sensory content or sense data can be interpretatively resituated as perceptual content are the conditions in which sensory content is a medium through which perceptual content can be given

by us. This thesis of cognitive primacy of sensory content can be complemented with a thesis of the *causal primacy of perceptual content* in the case of real perception, which is its ontological counterpart.

I can illustrate how harmless the above duplicity is by comparing it with the kind of doubling that occurs in our interpretation of objects we see in a mirror. What we see in a mirror can be interpreted as: (A') a simple image of things, for instance, the image of a vase of flowers on a table. But it can also be seen as: (B') the vase in itself that I am seeing in a mirror. For instance, I can point to an object I see in a mirror, and you can ask me if I am pointing to the reflected image of the vase of flowers or to the real vase of flowers behind me. That they belong to different domains is made clear by functional differences: the image isn't considered real, because it has a changeable size, we cannot touch, smell or break it. The real vase of flowers, on the other hand, has an unchangeable size, and can be touched, smelled, directly seen from all sides, manipulated, broken, etc.

However, by looking at the mirror, we would not be able to see the vase on the table without the help of the image; and the elements and relations between both will coincide, at least partially. As in the case above, (B') is cognitively dependent on (A'), because without the image (A') you couldn't see (B'). Alternatively, (A') is causally dependent on (B'). This is why when you pay attention to an object in a mirror you see it as perceptually dependent on its image, but when you pay attention to the image, you see it as causally dependent on the real object. You can easily say that you see the reality *through* the image. But you will never say that you cannot see the vase only because what you really see is only its image. Moreover, you can also say that you are seeing the real vase directly *by means of* its image, at least if you compare it with the same vase seen in a photo or a picture. You can see either the real vase or its image – but not both together. And the mirror-image also shows that our experience is perspectival. What we see are typically facets, aspects.

The analogy shows how we pass from the mind-dependent to a mind-independent interpretation of phenomena. We can observe an external factual content by means of its phenomenal experience as involving a purely sensory content, which is internal. The phenomenon of post-images illustra-

tes the point clearly: after looking at the sun very briefly one can close one's eyes, and the image of the sun does not disappear immediately. As we will see, the dichotomy considered above is also important because it is a condition for the defeasibility of observational evidence: it allows us to explain why evidence can deceive us.

Beyond the analogy, we can consider the case of the contextual differences between sensory experience and perceptual experience. When we compare sensory content with perceptual content, we can see that here there are also clear conditions to distinguish the first from the second. Together these conditions, which were already listed by philosophers like Descartes, Locke, Hume, Kant, Frege, and G. E. Moore, form what we could call the *reality criterion* (*Cf*. Costa 2018; 435-6). Based on them I can conceptualize the reality criterion as the conjunction of the following four conditions for the diagnosis of external reality. The first two are conditions of externality and can be spelled as:

1. The content must be given independent of our will,

2. The content must be capable of being object of interpersonal agreement under suitable circumstances.

The second two conditions constitutive of our criterion of reality are the following conditions of reality:

3. The content must be given to us in its most intense degree and detail, and often in co-sensorial modus.

4. The content must obey the laws of nature, it must display expected regularities of different forms, must be also contextually coherent.

Once the phenomenal content given to experience satisfies these four conditions *conjunctively*, we are usually allowed to interpret the content as being "the real thing": an externally given perceptual content, that is, an object, a singularized property (trope), an event, a state of affairs, a process... It is fundamental that the satisfaction is conjunctive, since when satisfied separately, these criteria can be only symptoms unable to warrant external reality (there are intense hallucinations, there are ways of controlling external rea-

lity using only the activation of the motor cortex, interpersonal hallucinations are possible under the influence of drugs, a very tedious dream can display usual regularities…). When a person has a dream, the person has sensory content without perceptual content. In a dream usually only condition (1) (of externality, it seems external) is satisfied. In the case of alcoholic hallucinosis not only condition (1) but also condition (3) (the images seem to be quite real) is satisfied, though not (2) and (4). We can say that in usual circumstances the satisfaction of the criterion of reality simply *defines* what is externally real. On the other hand, before the computational reconstruction of brain images, the thesis that sensory content exists, acting like a medium to be projected on the real world in real perception could be more easily contested.

As in the case of mirror images, the perceptually real content inferred from the conjunctive satisfaction of conditions (1) to (4) is cognitively (epistemically) dependent on pre-existing sensory content, which does not conjunctively satisfy conditions (1) to (4), but does satisfy criterial conditions for sense data, like that of being susceptible to the computational imagistic reconstruction of brain activity. And also in the same way as in the case of mirror images, sensory content can be shown to be causally (ontologically) dependent on pre-existing external perceptually real content (which does conjunctively satisfy conditions (1) to (4).

3. Response to the argument of Illusion

There are, however, two traditional arguments designed to show that the kind of direct realism suggested above must be wrong, and it is advisable to answer them here. They are the famous argument of illusion and the argument of science.

I begin with the famous argument of illusion. It usually concerns cases of perceptual illusions in which what we think we perceive is not what we should perceive, particularly in the extreme case of hallucinations in which we only imagine we perceive something. The main goal of the argument of illusion is the replacement of direct realism by *indirect realism*, according to which we perceive the objectively real world indirectly through the “veil of sensations” constituted by sensory perceptions or sense data.

There is an extensive philosophical literature aiming to show that the argument of illusion is fallacious, and we do directly perceive things around us as they really are. In my understanding of direct realism, I do not wish to deny that there are sensory impressions or sense data. I do not even wish to deny that we perceive the world through a "veil of sensations" or sensory perceptions or sense data, since by accepting (A) I have accepted these conclusions. What I reject is the claim that these things make our perception indirect, which is the basic claim of indirect realism. For we never say we perceive our sensations; what we might say is that we perceive the world directly through, or by means of, or by a contextualized interpretation of what we receive as our sensations or sensory impressions. This suggests that the fact that we can show we perceive the external world through a "veil of sensations" doesn't make our perception of the external world indirect, and it is a category mistake to defend this view. Put simply: the central problem with the argument of illusion is that it is based on a misunderstanding of the semantics of our concept of *being direct*. Consider the following two sentence pairs:

1. The trip is direct (the bus travels directly from Constance to Munich with a lunch stop of thirty minutes).

2. The trip is indirect (first you take a bus from Constance to Lindau, then a train to Munich).

1. The bullet struck the victim directly (after piercing window glass).

2. The bullet struck the victim indirectly (after ricocheting off a wall).

These examples show that what makes some relations direct is not necessarily the fact that we cannot find intermediaries between the *relata* – they very often exist and there can be more than just one. Directness/indirectness is an essentially conventional distinction that depends on the relevance of the intermediaries for what we aim to consider.

In the case of perception, conventions allow us to say that we perceive things around us directly, even if by means of causal processes involving a number of intermediaries. And there is nothing wrong in accepting the

view that we perceive things directly by means of sense data or through a "veil of sensations," just as much as there is nothing wrong in saying that the victim was struck directly by a bullet, though it first had to go through window glass.

Having in mind what I just said, I will consider only a few well-known examples of the argument of illusion, showing where they fail to prove that perceptual experience is indirect:

EXAMPLE 1: If with closed left eye I press the side of my right eye with my right finger, I have the impression that things in front of me move in the opposite direction. Consequently, what I see directly are only images of things, that is, sensory impressions, and not things as they are in themselves.

ANSWER: Even if I show by pressing my eye that I see things moving through my visual field, this does not mean that I am not seeing the things directly. In fact, I can even say, 'I see external things directly and precisely as they are, although they *seem* as if they were moving.'

EXAMPLE 2: If I hold my index finger fifty centimeters from my face and look at the other end of the room, I see two images of index fingers when focusing on the far wall. If I then focus my eyes on the finger, the two images merge into a single image. Since they are not phenomenally different in the two cases, I conclude that what I really see are sensory impressions of my index finger, even if I can locate my finger through these sense data.

ANSWER: As Searle has noted, I can instead say, 'I do not see two fingers… I am directly seeing my index finger *as if it were doubled*.'

EXAMPLE 3: I look at a coin that I am holding at an angle. I know it is round, but it appears elliptical. Indeed, only occasionally do I see a coin with a round form, which is called its real form. So, what I primarily see are my sensory impressions.

ANSWER: About the form of the coin, it appears elliptical, but I can say that I directly see a round coin that *only looks elliptical* because it is being held at an angle. – As A. J. Ayer noted, what we consider to be real is often a question of *convention* (*Cf.* Ayer 1973, Ch. 4). We have the convention that the real form of a coin or a table is the form we see when we look at them from above. In the same way, we have a convention that the real form of a mountain is the form we see when looking at it from the ground below it at a distance, but not an aerial view from above (*e.g.*, Matterhorn, Sugarloaf). The real color of a tropical mountain is normally green, even if it may seem blue when viewed from a great distance, etc.

EXAMPLE 4: Suppose I have a perfect hallucination of a white horse. What I see is not a real white horse, but only a hallucinatory image. Since this image made of sense data isn't different from what I see when I see a real

white horse, the primary object of perception must be my sensory impressions or sense-data.

ANSWER: Finally, in the case of a hallucination, it is simply *wrong* to say that I see the content of my hallucination. I only believe I see it, when in fact there is nothing there to be seen! Verbs like 'seeing,' 'perceiving,' 'being aware of' are primarily related to the factual, objective content, and not to a merely sensory content. Even if it is through sensory content that we have perceptions of things, this does not make our realism indirect. In a similar way, when we say that a bus made a stop of thirty minutes for lunch, this does not mean that the bus trip was indirect.

Summarizing: we perceive things directly, even under misleading conditions like those of delusions, which justifies the direct realist view of whatever is given in perception. Nor does this means that there cannot be an irrelevant veil of sensory impressions or sense data in-between, being interpretatively relocated as constituents of objective reality. This justifies my psychological interpretation (A) of a given content as based merely on sensory data, without forcing me to reject interpretation (B).

3. Response to the argument of science

Finally, a word about the argument of science. According to this argument, perceptual experience depends on the stimulation of distal neuronal cells that in the end leads to the stimulation of cortical regions in the brain. In the visual case, as far as I know, it seems that what we call sensory impressions or sense data has much to do with the activation of the striate cortex, because the stimulation of this region without the activation of photoreceptors in the retina is apt to produce hallucinatory phenomena (Teeple, Caplan, Stern 2009: 26-32). The conclusion of this argument is that our experience is in fact the experience of something occurring in our brain, which is nothing but the experience of sensory impressions or sense data. Consequently, our direct experience can only be one of these sensory impressions occurring in our brain. From this it should follow that we cannot have a direct experience of the world around us; it also follows that we cannot have any warrant that our contents of experience reflect the way the external world really is. We cannot even be sure of its real existence. Worse yet, we may be led to the incredible conclusion that since our brain also be-

long to the external world, we cannot even be sure that our brain exists... All we can be sure of is that there are all these changing flocks of sensory impressions!

The answer to the argument of science is that there is nothing semantically wrong in saying that we directly experience things given in the external world, even if this experience requires underlying neuronal work as intermediary means. In the case of visual perception, the relevant point is that the sentence 'I directly see the object' belongs to our ordinary language, while expressions like 'by stimulating of distal neuronal cells…' or 'through activating the striate cortex…' indicate underlying intermediating neurobiological processes responsible for this direct experience, expressible in a neuroscientific language with a very different semantic import. The argument of science is based on a confusion between ordinary and scientific languages.

4. Phenomenalist objection

There is still a phenomenalist objection. The objection can be expressed as follows: The internal contents, the sense data, are of a mental, psychological nature. If through the satisfaction of a criterion of external reality, they are interpreted or projected as external, turning into external contents – for instance, this computer with its singularized properties like weight, hardness, colors, luminosity, forms… – then these contents must remain mental or psychological. This means that the external world is phenomenally constituted by internal, psychological constituents, which are externalized sense data! This means idealism, if not also solipsism.

Against this radical view there is a Kantian middle way solution: what we usually call the external world is constituted by mental phenomena, but there is something beyond them that is the world as a thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*), an *x* that is beyond cognition. This thing-in-itself is *noumenal*, that is, it must be beyond the phenomenal domain, which also means beyond the reach of our knowledge. In this way, grounding what we know by means of what we do not know, Kant arrives at his transcendental idealism. This would be the most reasonable way to solve the problem.

The answer I can give is that, although this seems to be the most reasonable solution, it creates another equally serious difficulty. How to justify the existence of this thing-in-itself? Is it not an odd, empty hypothesis that cannot be proven and is consequently senseless? One answer to the problem is that the thing-in-itself should not be thought of as a real thing. It must be thought of as something dim, like the reverse side of a sheet of paper, when the first side is the phenomenal side. But then, how can we know that our phenomenal world is like a sheet of paper wich has another side and we do not even know what kind of thing the other side is? The metaphor thus does not seems very helpful.

I believe that we do not need to fall into the traps of transcendental idealism in order to solve the problem. When the content of sensation, the sense data, the qualia, satisfies the criterion of reality, that is, the conditions of externality and reality, it can be interpreted-projected-relocated as something qualitatively identical in the external world. This content, when considered as satisfying the criterion of reality, is simply *defined* as an external spatiotemporal singularized property (trope) or a bunch of external compresent singularized properties, namely, as a material object, or as any combination of these two things building external empirical facts (states of affairs, events, processes…).

My proposal is that with this kind of direct realism we not only have the cake but also permission to eat it. But isn't this just a hat trick? My answer is that if it is magic, it is the sort we find in everyday life. In the same way we need to get used to time dilation in physics, we need to get used to thinking that internal psychological content, if it satisfies the criterion of external reality, allows us to project or situate it as a simile into the external world as an external physical content. Finally, one can suggest that there is an ontologically deeper glue joining these contents, which is that both are made up of singularized properties (tropes): the external content must be made of external singularized properties that are physical ones, while the internal content must be made up of internal singularized properties, which from our perspective are mental or psychological ones, though constituted by physical tropes. Because both contents are structures made up of properties singularized in space and time, they can be seen as qualitati-

vely identical, in this way justifying our cognitive access to the external world.

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