Direct Realism and the Brain-in-a-Vat Argument

One of the advantages traditionally claimed for direct realist theories of perception over indirect realist theories is that the direct realist is able to avoid skeptical problems to which the indirect realist falls prey. If the only things we are ever directly aware of are the ideas in our own minds, it is asked, then what reason do we have for thinking anything other than ideas exists? How do premises about ideas confirm propositions about physical objects? This is one sort of skeptical worry that the direct realist has an obvious prima facie advantage in dealing with.

However, there are other sorts of skeptical problems that direct realism does not seem to particularly help us with, and it is on one of those that I want to focus. Specifically, does the direct realist have an answer to brain-in-a-vat skepticism that is not available to the indirect realist? I claim that the answer is yes. …

1. Direct & indirect realism

Direct realism is often understood as the view that, in cases of normal perception, we are directly aware of something in the external world. This “something” could include external objects, events, or states of affairs; surfaces of external objects; and/or properties of external objects. Indirect realism is then characterized as the view that, in normal perception, we are only directly aware of internal (mental) phenomena, and we are indirectly aware of external phenomena, by means of our awareness of the mental phenomena. These internal, mental phenomena could include mental objects, states, events, and/or properties. So there can be different versions of indirect realism, according to what the theorist says about the nature of the mental phenomena that perception makes us aware of: the indirect realist might hold that what we are directly aware of are sense data, or states of “being appeared to” in certain ways, or some other sort of mental phenomena.

That is one traditional way of formulating the issue, but I’m going to use a slightly different formulation here. For our present purposes, what we need is an explicitly epistemological characterization of direct and indirect realism, a characterization in terms of the justification for perceptual beliefs. A person’s belief that P is a perceptual belief if the (causal) explanation for why he believes that P is that he perceives that P. For instance, the explanation for why I believe that there is a pen here might be that I see that there is a pen here, which is a particular way of perceiving that there is a pen here, so I have the perceptual belief that there is a pen here. Now we can define indirect realism as the view that, at least in normal cases, perceptual beliefs about the external world are justified, but they depend for their justification on our being aware of certain mental phenomena. So for example, my belief that there is a pen here might depend for its justification on my awareness of a sense datum of a pen, or on my awareness of a state of being appeared to penishly, etc. Direct realism is the view that, at least in normal cases, our perceptual beliefs about the external world have justification that does not depend on our being aware of mental phenomena, or anything else that’s not in the external world. …
3. Why direct realism may be irrelevant to the argument

At first glance, it is not obvious how the issue between direct and indirect realism is relevant to [the BIV] skeptical argument. One could say that, if direct realism is true, it follows that the skeptical argument is unsound, since direct realism as we have defined it involves the claim that we are justified in believing propositions about the external world. But it is equally true that, if indirect realism is true, then the skeptical argument is unsound, since indirect realism also involves the claim that we are justified in believing propositions about the external world. So far, no advantage for direct realism is evident. And neither of these observations constitutes a response to the skeptical argument; the skeptic will simply reject both forms of realism as I have formulated them. …

6. A reformulation of the skeptic’s argument and the direct realist’s response

Now consider the following epistemological principle, which I will call the “Preference Principle” (because it concerns the preference of one hypothesis over another):

(6) If E is any evidence and H₁ and H₂ are two incompatible explanations for E, then S is justified in believing H₁ on the basis of E only if S has an independent reason for rejecting H₂.

In this context, an “independent reason” means a reason distinct from H₁ and not justified, directly or indirectly, through H₁. So the idea is that when you’re faced with two competing explanations of certain data, you can’t accept the one explanation until you have first ruled out the other. One’s reasons for rejecting H₂ might include a priori reasons, such as that H₂ is significantly less simple than H₁, as well as empirical reasons. …

The Preference Principle seems plausible intuitively …

Now when we turn to the brain-in-a-vat argument, we can see why the argument would appear to be sound and non-question-begging—if one accepts one of the assumptions of indirect realism. If one accepts that beliefs about the external world are hypotheses for which the evidence is that we have certain sorts of sensory experiences, then the Preference Principle comes into play. Frank Jackson states this view particularly clearly:

Our beliefs about objects, all of them (including the ones about causal links between sense-data and objects), form a theory, “the theory of the external world,” which is then justified by its explanatory and predictive power with respect to our sense-data. [Perception, 1977, pp. 143-44]
Our ordinary, common sense beliefs about the external world, on the one hand, and the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis, on the other hand, are then two competing explanations for the same data. Therefore, … we must rule out the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis in order to be justified in accepting our common sense beliefs about the external world on the basis of that data. So the indirect realist is faced with the responsibility of refuting the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis.

On the other hand, we can also see why we need not accept the brain-in-a-vat argument with its skeptical conclusion—if we adopt a direct realist account of perception. For the direct realist, perceptual beliefs about the external world are foundational; they are not hypotheses posited to explain anything. Some beliefs about the external world are hypotheses posited to explain evidence, such as atomic theory or electromagnetic theory; but immediate perceptual beliefs such as “Here is a red, round thing” are not. …

Furthermore, the direct realist is in a position to explain simply how I know I’m not a brain in a vat. When I look at my two hands, for example, I know directly that I have two hands. It follows from this that I am not a brain in a vat. Notice that what is a question-begging argument for the indirect realist is not question-begging for the direct realist. For the indirect realist, the argument just proposed is circular, because I have to start with the mere fact that I have certain sorts of experiences. From there, I don’t have any way of getting to the claim that I have two hands except by ruling out the alternative explanations of those experiences. So I can’t use the fact that I have two hands to rule out skeptical alternatives. But the argument is not circular as proposed by the direct realist, because I’m allowed to start from the claim that I have two hands. I’m not required to give an argument for that, so in particular I do not have to give an argument for it that presupposes the conclusion that I’m not a brain in a vat. The conclusion that I’m not a brain in a vat can be justified by a linear argument starting from foundational propositions.

7. Two objections

… Objection #2: Does my response to skepticism merely beg the question? The skeptic’s position is that we are not justified in believing any contingent propositions about the external world. I have responded to the skeptic by putting forward a direct realist account of perceptual knowledge. In asserting direct realism, I am asserting that we have a certain kind of justification for certain propositions about the external world. So at least part of my direct realist thesis is simply the negation of the skeptical thesis—namely, that we are justified in believing some propositions about the external world. Doesn’t this mean that my response merely begs the question against skepticism? Obviously, the skeptic will just immediately reject direct realism. How does my asserting direct realism constitute any more of a response to the skeptic’s position than just saying, “Skepticism is false”?
In answer to this objection, we need to distinguish two senses in which one might give a “response to the skeptic.” One way to respond to the skeptic would be to give a positive argument, addressed to the skeptic, to show that we do have knowledge of the external world. This we might term an aggressive response to the skeptic. As the above objection shows, I have not given an adequate response of this kind. In fact, I do not believe it is possible to give a non-question-begging, positive argument against skepticism.

However, another sense in which one might be said to respond to the skeptic is this: one might confront an argument produced by the skeptic that tries to show that we don’t have knowledge of the external world, and show how our common sense beliefs can be defended in the face of that argument. That is, one might demonstrate how the skeptical argument fails to give us a good reason for thinking that we don’t know about the external world. We can call this sort of response a defensive response to the skeptic.

That is the sort of response I have provided. Given this aim, my asserting direct realism is a legitimate and non-question-begging move. I do not put forward direct realism as a premise from which to prove, positively, that we can know about the external world. That would certainly beg the question. Rather, I argue that the skeptic has only refuted one possible account of our knowledge of the external world, namely, indirect realism. I put forward direct realism by way of showing that there is an alternative account of our knowledge of the external world that is not damaged by the skeptical argument. The point is that if we take the direct realist line, then the skeptic hasn’t given us any non-question-begging grounds for changing our position. The skeptic has merely assumed that we will take the indirect realist line.

8. Conclusion

Now let’s conclude with a review of what I have and haven’t done. I have proposed an epistemological form of direct realism according to which perception gives us a kind of justification for certain beliefs about the external world that is

(a) foundational, in the sense that the perceptual beliefs are not based on any other beliefs, but
(b) defeasible, in the sense that countervailing evidence can rationally require us to revise the perceptual beliefs.

I have not sought to elaborate and argue for this theory in any detail. Rather, I have focused on demonstrating one important advantage that a theory of this kind has over indirect realism, an advantage that has hitherto been overlooked by direct and indirect realists alike. I have shown that, whereas the indirect realist has an obligation of refuting the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis on grounds independent of our common sense beliefs about the external world, the direct realist can easily refute the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis on the basis of his beliefs about the external world.
We saw that this does not involve the epistemological direct realist in circular reasoning, since he is able to construct a valid deductive argument starting only from foundational propositions. …

Thus, we’ve revealed a new way in which direct realism comes to our aid in fending off skepticism. I haven’t shown that the indirect realist is inevitably committed to skepticism, since the indirect realist might still come up with a way to argue against the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis on a priori grounds. The direct realist’s advantage is simply that he doesn’t need to go down that road—he doesn’t have to play the skeptic’s game to begin with. Moreover, the direct realist does not make out our knowledge of the external world to be contingent on any abstract, recherché reasoning of which only a small percentage of people in the world are aware. Refuting the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis is not a precondition on having knowledge of the external world, and such knowledge is well within the reach of all normal human beings.