

Visual Experience and Demonstrative thought

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(This is still a very rough draft – sections are missing as well as citations and footnotes etc. Please DO NOT quote, cite or circulate.)

OVERVIEW

There is an ancient debate as to whether what visual consciousness provides – the “visual field” – is, at least sometimes, access to the mind-independent environment itself, or to some sort of features that can be common to perception and hallucinations/dreams. I want to raise a problem for the latter, orthodox view concerning the account it yields of our demonstrative thoughts formed on the basis of experience. On a natural story: we selectively attend to – or “single-out” – some feature or element in our visual field and can thereby form a demonstrative thought about it. Sometimes one can look at an item and attend to it in one’s visual field as part of thinking about some other distinct item. For example: S can attend to a waxwork sculpture of Barack Obama and think “*That* is the first black president of the Harvard Law Review”. S’s thought here can refer to Obama himself rather than to the sculpture. However, it seems that in such a case S needs to have some *understanding* that the “proximal” item in her visual field is distinct from, but related to, the other “distal” item. If S really would not acknowledge that she is looking at a model/representation of Obama rather than the real Obama, then it seems that her demonstrative thought must count as false. She has mistakenly demonstrated and so referred to something other than the first black president of the Harvard Law Review.

Why should this be a problem for indirect/common-factor theories? Well, it is commonly accepted that such theories are *revisionary* with respect to everyday, non-philosophical beliefs. In other words, non-philosophers would *not* in general acknowledge as true the claim that the elements comprising the visual field are distinct from (though related to) any environmental features. (Hence the label: “naïve realism”.) So they would be mistaking a non-environmental feature for an environmental feature. But given the above line of reasoning, such a mistake means that the non-philosophical laity would be quite systematically failing to refer to features in their environment when they form demonstrative thoughts via experience – and so quite systematically forming false demonstrative thoughts via experience (or perhaps failing to form thoughts that refer at all). This seems like an unattractively radical consequence for a theory to have: though it is not necessarily a decisive flaw.

Very little is entirely uncontroversial about conscious experience and thought. When trying to say something on these topics one has to start somewhere and it is almost impossible not to make certain assumptions. Of course, I hope that the assumptions I make seem pretty plausible, but it would be too much to hope they are entirely beyond dispute. So I will begin by trying to make my assumptions about experience and about demonstrative thought completely explicit and to flag those issues and controversies I wish to remain neutral on.

1. SOME ASSUMPTIONS

It has seemed plausible to many philosophers that when we perceive an item (object or feature) we are able to think about it in a certain way. Perceptual experience allows for *demonstrative thought*. Demonstrative thought here contrasts with descriptive thought. A descriptive thought about O involves thinking of O via a descriptive or conceptual mode of presentation, whereas in a demonstrative thought one refers to O without any such descriptive/conceptual mode of presentation. Here is Robin Jeshion articulating this distinction:

“I can think that a particular rose is lovely by thinking “*the tallest yellow rose in the garden is lovely*”. My thought is about that particular rose because it satisfies, ‘fits’, the descriptive condition *the tallest yellow rose in the garden*. Alternatively, I can think of these individuals in a way that does not depend essentially on my mode of conceptualising them. I can visually attend to the rose itself and think *that is lovely*, where “that”, as it functions in my thought, refers deictically to the object I attend to – that very rose.” (Jeshion 2010)

I will not attempt to defend or motivate this widely-accepted distinction between demonstrative and descriptive thoughts – I will simply assume that there is such a distinction. Jeshion’s passage contains what I take to be a very natural and plausible story: by selectively attending to some element in one’s visual field, one is able to form a demonstrative thought about it and to demonstratively refer to it. On this story, the act of directing one’s (cognitive) attention is (partially) determining the reference of the demonstrative component of one’s thought. (I will generally speak of “singling out” for this mental act of focusing/directing cognitive attention at one particular element in one’s visual field.)

In his “Reference and Consciousness” (2002), John Campbell argues for the following thesis:

(1) Conscious experience of O is necessary for demonstrative reference to O.

Against thesis (1) it might be claimed that, at least in principle, non-conscious perception of O could allow for demonstrative reference to O. Or indeed it might be claimed that perception of O, whether conscious or not, is unnecessary for demonstrative thought about O. I will *not* attempt to defend or motivate thesis (1). The natural story about experience and demonstratives assumes only a weaker thesis:

(1*) Normal humans can, and often do in fact, make demonstrative reference to O via their conscious experience of O.

In other words, whether or not it is the only way to demonstratively refer to O, a subject's conscious experience of O *can* play a role in allowing the subject to demonstratively refer to O.

There is a debate as to whether conscious experience of O always involves attending to O – as it happens I tend to think that it does not. But as the “natural” story I am telling about demonstrative reference involves both conscious experience of O and selective attention to O, this issue is irrelevant to the paper so I make no assumption either way here. However, I *am* assuming that conscious experience of O need not involve a subject forming a thought about O (nor about their experience of O) – we can experience more than we think about. In other words I am assuming a distinction between what the passive visual faculty provides and what the subject then actively thinks in response. When I open my eyes a “visual field”, containing spatially arrayed elements – *whose nature I have so far left entirely open!* – is made *available* for me to direct my thought at and cognitively react to. But I need not, and normally do not, form a thought about every element in my visual field.

The nature of the visual field, or its constituent elements, is contentious in more than one way. For example, Dickie (2010) argues against the idea, which she labels the “Old empiricist View”, that “perception delivers only a shifting mosaic of features, which you will call ‘colour (or texture, or shape) patches’ or ‘sense-data’ depending on whether you are prepared to allow that they exist independently of our experience of them”¹. There are two distinct issues then:

¹ Actually the term ‘sense-data’ has been used by Moore to mean mind-independent but non-environmental features, and by Bermudez (2000) to mean mind-independent but non-objectual environmental features (surfaces). But this is a trivial point about terminology.

(a) Whether perceptual experience provides “an array of features laid out around us and developing over time”, or whether it delivers a visual field already divided into “units” or “visual objects”?

(b) Whether the elements constituting the visual field are non-environmental (common factor across perception and hallucination), or whether the visual field constitutively involves environmental elements? (This is the traditional metaphysical problem of perceptual experience.)

Dickie points to empirical results that suggest an answer to (a) – the visual field comes pre-divided into “visual objects”, units which have such characteristics as spatio-temporal continuity and moving/acting as a whole, not as a mosaic of transient, shifting quality patches. But I take it that the two issues are logically independent. How the visual field is segmented or articulated is one question, the metaphysical status of the visual field (or its constituent elements) is another².

In addition to thesis (1) above, Campbell (2002) also takes a position on issue (b), arguing for the following thesis:

(2) Our conscious experience must be relational in structure in order to allow for demonstrative reference via conscious experience.

Now, the term “Visual field” is ambiguous between the portion of physical environment that lies within a subject’s visual range, and the subject’s visual experience of that environment from a particular perspective – which, according to a common-factor theorist, does not constitutively involve the environmental features. But this ambiguity suits our purpose here, as we need a term that is neutral between relational and common-factor (“direct” and “indirect”) theories of perceptual experience. So as I am using it then, the “visual field” consists of *whatever* it is that visual consciousness delivers or makes available for the subject. I will allow that environmental features *and* mental/inner features can be elements within the visual field.

As stated, my aim in this paper will be to bring out an unattractive consequence for the common-factor theorist’s account of demonstrative reference. This will not be a decisive refutation of the

² E.g. Bermudez (2000) claims that we directly experience environmental sense-data, i.e. external/mind-independent quality patches or “surfaces” that are not standard physical objects. On this view the visual field *is* constituted by mind-independent features but is *not* segmented/articulated into objects.

common-factor account, but it will provide a reason in favour of the relational account insofar as it provides a more attractive account of how we can demonstratively refer via experience. So whilst I will not try, as Campbell does, to show that experience *must* be relational in structure in order to allow for demonstrative reference via conscious experience (thesis (2)), I will try to show that the relational model provides a *better* account of demonstrative reference via conscious experience.

Finally, let me state a claim about experience and demonstrative reference that strikes me as very plausible:

In order to be able to selectively attend to an element in one's visual field and so to "tag" it with a demonstrative "*that...*", one need *as yet* know nothing at all about the element. One can simply wonder: "What's *that*?" without yet having formed any beliefs about the item one sees and attends to. Perhaps one is always *in a position* to form some true belief about an element in one's visual experience – i.e. I don't rule out that some form of infallibility thesis is true. But attending to some aspect of one's experience is surely explanatorily prior to forming a belief about it; one does not need any belief about the element *in order* to attentively single the element out. And perhaps one will always know something trivial, such as: *this* is the item I am currently visually aware of. But such knowledge is not explanatory of the successful demonstrative reference – we can imagine a cognitively unsophisticated creature, which lacks any concept of visual experience, yet which still has the capacity for simple demonstrative reference to the items it sees.

So the mere act of selectively attending to some element in one's experience does not depend on having a belief about the element, and is prior to conceptual thought about the element. This strikes me both as Phenomenologically plausible, but it also seems to be supported by the sort of empirical results that Dickie and Campbell cite. The visual field comes pre-discriminated into "visual objects" – i.e. this segmentation is achieved "sub-personally". The personal-level act of selectively attending to one of these "objects" does not require or involve that the subject deploy a concept – such as "physical object".

In particular, notice that one need not have a belief as to whether an element one visually experiences is environmental or non-environmental (nor deploy such concepts) in order to attentively single it out and demonstratively refer to it – for one might reasonably wonder "Is *that* a physical object or a floater in my eyeball or a visual hallucination?"

2. SNOWDON'S DISTINCTION

Let's now turn to considering the sort of everyday case that would intuitively count as an instance of indirectly seeing something – that is, cases in which one might be said to see one environmental item in virtue of *really* seeing some other environmental item. E.g. I see O's shadow, but I do not see O itself. Or, I see a photograph of O but I do not see O itself. These are cases in which I am looking at some item, M, that is clearly distinct from O. (Of course there are also all sorts of difficult, unclear cases – I discuss these below in section 5.) Here the following seems quite obvious: if I have no idea that M bears any sort of relationship to O, then when I mentally single out M in my visual field and think “What's *that*?”, or think “*That* is F”, my demonstrative refers to M and not O. E.g. I see (what is in fact) the shadow of a rabbit and think “What's *that*?”, or think “*That* is moving quickly”. If I have no grasp or understanding whatsoever that the thing I see is related somehow to the rabbit, but distinct from the rabbit, then there is no way that my demonstrative can be referring to the rabbit. I must have referred to the shadow. If I had wondered: “is *that* a rabbit?” the answer would have been: no, *that* is a shadow.

Of course, as soon as I have some grasp or understanding of the fact that M and O are distinct (but related) items, then I might single out M in my visual field whilst my thought refers to O. So long as I minimally realise that what I'm looking at is not literally the rabbit, but some distinct thing related to it, then I could, for example, mentally single out the shadow in my visual field whilst my thought refers to the rabbit. E.g. given such understanding, my thought “*That* is a rabbit” would be true³.

Now let's consider a case in which I *mistake* M, the item I see and attentively single out, for O. E.g. I see brilliantly life-like trompe l'oeil picture of my rabbit that fools me – I wrongly believe

³ When I say that a subject needs some grasp or understanding of the indirect nature of their situation, I do not mean that they must *explicitly think* of it at the time of making their demonstrative judgement. I only mean that they *would* have acknowledged, if asked, that they were really aware of something distinct from O. (Again, I follow Snowdon (1992) here). E.g. Whilst watching a film I can become “immersed” in the action so that I lose any explicit, occurrent awareness that I am looking at an image on a flat screen. I might then think: “*That* is Bruce Willis”. My thought here does still successfully refer to the real Bruce Willis so long as I *would* acknowledge, if asked, the truth of some such claim as: “*That* is really an image of Bruce Willis”. I don't need to consciously endorse such a claim when I think my original demonstrative thought. But if I really would not have acknowledged this fact had I been asked, then I am in trouble – for I must believe that Bruce Willis is literally located inside my TV. I would be mistaking a flat, coloured image for a real human being.

that the thing I'm looking at literally is my rabbit. I fail to understand that the item I see is an entity distinct from my rabbit – I would not acknowledge that there is a picture before my eyes. And now, whilst singling-out the picture in my visual field, I think: “*That* is my rabbit”. What does my demonstrative thought refer to here?

I think it is pretty clear that this thought must count as false, the demonstrative having picked out a picture rather than my rabbit. At the very least we can say that:

If my demonstrative “that” has its reference fixed by my attentive-singling-out act, then I have referred to M (the picture), not O (the rabbit).

So my thought would be false, but other thoughts might, fortuitously, have been true – e.g. if I had thought “*That* is white” where picture and rabbit are both white. The point is that when I am mistaken about which entity it is that's being attentively selected within the array, then a demonstrative based on this singling-out will not refer as I expect it to.

All of this suggests an elucidation of the difference between “direct” and “indirect” awareness. When S has direct visual awareness of O, S does not need any particular knowledge or belief about O in order to be able to demonstratively refer to O (via a visual singling-out act). But when S has indirect visual awareness of O, via visual awareness of some intermediary M, S is only able to demonstratively refer to O (via a visual singling-out) if S has *some grasp* that what she is singling out is something distinct from O and bears some sort of linking relation to O. Snowdon (1992) puts this distinction in terms of “dependent” and “non-dependent” demonstrative reference:

SNOWDON'S DISTINCTION: Indirect awareness of O allows only for *dependent* demonstrative reference to O – the success of which *depends* on the subject grasping something about O (its distinctness from M).

Direct awareness of O, in contrast, allows for *non-dependent* demonstrative reference – for the success of the demonstrative referring to O *does not depend* on anything other than the awareness itself (and the subject's minimal ability to selectively attend to elements within this awareness and “tag” them with a demonstrative “*that...*” thought).

I think that if we are going to distinguish between direct and indirect visual awareness at all, then it is very hard to deny that Snowdon's point is a consequence for demonstrative thought that refer *via*

visual awareness. The very idea of indirect awareness must surely involve two distinct items; the subject has indirect awareness of one in virtue of having direct awareness of the other. And so it seems clear that: *if reference is being fixed via the singling-out act*, and if you are mistaken about which item it is you are singling out, then a demonstrative that refers via this singling out will not refer to the item you take yourself to be referring to. For your demonstrative to successfully refer to one item (O), whilst singling out of another distinct item (M), you must understand which item is which (and that the two are connected in some way) – otherwise you will simply be mistaken as to what it is you are singling out and so what your demonstrative refers to. Indirect awareness of O then is a sort of awareness that can facilitate demonstrative reference to O *only given some understanding* about what one is directly aware of and singling out. Direct awareness of O, in contrast, allows one to demonstrate O in thought without any such understanding – it requires only that one can mentally select a portion of one’s visual field and “tag” it in thought with a “*That...*”.

3. SOME COMPLICATIONS

In these cases where the subject mistakes M for O, one might worry whether the reference of the demonstrative *is* actually fixed by the singling-out act. One might think that if I am *mistaking* M for O, then I will have an *intention* to refer to O. Now I will also presumably have an intention to refer to the item I have singled-out. But someone might try to argue that it is the former intention that takes precedence – i.e. the intention to refer to O is what matters to fixing the reference; the singling-out act (or the intention to refer via such an act) is just an idle accompaniment.

The first thing to say in response is that this would no longer be a case of *demonstrative* thought. If I have already formed an intention to refer to O when I think “*that is F*”, and it is this intention that is determining the reference of my thought, then I will be thinking about O via some pre-existent concept, or “file”, I have for O. This would be a descriptive thought about O, not a demonstrative thought. I’ll allow that there might be cases of this descriptive kind. But there are also cases of genuinely demonstrative thought, in which the singling-out act, or perhaps the intention to refer via the singling-out act, *is* a determinant of reference.

Moreover, it would be, I suggest, deeply implausible to claim that (mistaken) singling out acts, or intentions to refer via such acts, are *never* relevant to determining a thought’s reference – these attentional acts would be left strangely redundant, serving no purpose. I think it would clearly be

taking charity too far to systematically ignore any mistaken singling-out acts when determining reference, for it would seem to rule out even the possibility that what a subject demonstrated might turn out to be something other than the subject expects. And such mistakes certainly can occur; we need to leave space for the possibility of such a mistake. E.g. Suppose that after I mistake the picture for the rabbit, someone produces my real rabbit and sets it alongside the replica. It is clearly a possibility that I would now admit my mistake: “Oops, my previous thought was wrong: *this* is my rabbit, not *that*”. Were reference *always* fixed by the intention to refer to O (rather than the singling-out of M or the intention to refer via that singling-out) then this possibility would be excluded.

(Of course, I *might* react differently: I might insist “my previous thought was correct; I was thinking about my rabbit, though I happened to be mistaken about the item in my visual field”. But as already stated, this would just be to insist that my previous thought was descriptive rather than genuinely demonstrative – I must have been thinking about my rabbit via some pre-existent concept and not via my visual experience.)

Having raised the issue of the possibility of having conflicting referential intentions (or conflicting referential determinants) I should make clear that I am not offering any general recipe for deciding between the conflicting factors. I have only argued that there *are* cases in which it is the singling-out act (or the intention to refer to what is singled-out) that fixes the reference of the thought.

I also want to emphasise is that I am concerned with cases where it is the subject’s visual awareness that is the means or channel by which an item is attended to or mentally pointed at. Obviously there are also other channels by which to demonstrate items. There are the other senses for a start, which could also provide awareness of an item and so allow it to be demonstratively referred to. Testimony, spoken or written, that mentions an object might also allow one to demonstrate that object. And perhaps one can think demonstratively of something where one remembers some previous acquaintance or encounter with it⁴.

Clearly then, a failure to understand that one is visually aware of an intermediary, M, will not prevent demonstrative reference to O when one is demonstrating O via some other, non-visual-

⁴ Though perhaps it is not so clear that in the memory case we would normally be employing a *demonstrative* element in thought, where this is something like a bare label or tag. When we recall an object previously encountered we would normally have some kind of richer concept of, or “file” on, the object. Though we may not have an explicit name for the object, we would not be *thinking* of it using the mental equivalent of a mere label or pointer.

awareness channel. E.g. whilst listening to a conversation in which someone is describing the exploits of various pet animals, I might attend to and mentally single out some element in the conversation and think “*That is my rabbit*”. If at the same time I also happen to be looking at a brilliant replica of the rabbit, which I also happen to have mistaken for the real-life rabbit, my demonstrative can still refer to the actual rabbit provided the mental singling-out act that is fixing the reference of my thought is directed at the conversation’s subject-matter and not at the replica-rabbit in my visual field. In this case my mistake as to which object I am looking at will be irrelevant.

And then again there can be problem cases in which there are mixed, conflicting channels that could be determining the reference of a demonstrative thought⁵. I might be visually aware of A and tactilely aware of B, but wrongly take what I am seeing and what I am touching to be the same item. If I then form a thought “*This is F*” it can be quite unclear which item I am thinking of. Basically I want to bracket such difficult cases. My main point was put in conditional form: *if* selectively attending to a part of one’s visual field is fixing one’s demonstrative thought-reference, then a failure to grasp that one is indirectly aware of O will prevent demonstrative reference to O *via that visual singling-out act*. Unless one keeps in mind the focus on visual singling-out, such difficult, mixed cases might be thought to be counterexamples to the Snowdon-style claim. E.g. Say I am watching a brilliantly life-like animated film of a rabbit hopping about. The animation is matching the real time movements of the real rabbit. And I am mistaking the image I see for the real rabbit. But say I am also simultaneously touching the real rabbit. And I have no understanding that what I see and what I touch are distinct things. Now when I think “*This is cute*” it might be quite unclear whether I intend the reference of the demonstrative to be fixed via my vision or my touch – given that I wrongly think that I am seeing what I am touching I might well take myself to be directing attention at a single object equally via both senses.

All I want to say about this kind of mixed-channel case is that to the extent that we allow visual awareness, and the subject’s selective attention to the visual field, to fix the reference of their demonstrative thought, the subject’s lack of understanding will then prevent reference to an indirect object. To the extent that other channels or means are allowed a role in fixing the reference, then the subject’s ignorance about what they are really seeing may not matter. It is also

⁵ Shoemaker (1968) considers this kind of problem case, though he is not concerned to adjudicate which item if any gets referred to in such cases. See also Siegel (2002).

worth noting that indirect theorists are typically indirect about *all* the senses, so it is not clear that appealing to other senses would ameliorate the referential difficulties.

Similar complications arise when we consider “complex demonstratives” where a noun phrase is appended to a “*that*” or a “*this*”; as in “*That* rabbit is cute”, “*This* shirt is dirty” etc. There is much disagreement on the role of such noun phrases in determining the reference of the demonstrative. There is a question as to whether complex demonstratives are singular terms whose meaning (in a context) is simply the referent, or whether they are really quantificational in something like the way definite descriptions are held to be quantificational. And even assuming that complex demonstratives are still singular terms, there is then the question of what the role of the noun phrase is – does it’s meaning restrict the possible reference of the complex demonstrative? Is the meaning of the noun phrase part of the content of the overall proposition?

I don’t want to wade in to these controversies here. Again, and depending on one’s exact theory, there will be problem cases where one selectively attends to something that is not of the kind specified by the noun phrase⁶. So, once more, there could be problematically conflicting referential intentions. E.g. I am looking at a replica of the rabbit that I mistake for the real rabbit. I direct attention at the replica and think “*That* rabbit is furry”. Here I presumably intend to refer to the item in my visual field I am directing attention at, but I also intend to refer to a *rabbit* – I wrongly believe these are intentions to refer to the same one item. To the extent that the latter intention is working to determine reference, then this is not an instance of a demonstrative whose reference is being fixed by an act of visual singling out – one would be demonstratively referring to the rabbit via some prior acquaintance with it, or perhaps by it’s satisfying some quantificational description.

To repeat: I take the Snowdon-style point to unproblematically apply only to cases where the subject is clearly demonstrating *via her visual awareness* (rather than via some other channel or is using a pre-existent concept). And I think that such cases will still be plentifully common in everyday situations. E.g. when a subject fixes attention on an element in her visual awareness and simply wonders: “What’s *that*?”. Here there are no referential intentions to pick out something of a certain kind or something one has previously encountered or referred to and there is no question of the other senses complicating matters.

⁶ This, I take it, is similar to what is going on in Donnellan’s (1966) well-known examples illustrating his distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions.

A final point I should make explicit is that I have been concerned with demonstrative *thought* rather than public language utterances, and with *mental* singling-out acts rather than with the sorts of overt, external factors that might be determinants of reference for publicly uttered demonstratives – e.g. physical finger pointing. Thus, some of the sorts of contextual factors that might be invoked as relevant to the reference of publicly uttered demonstratives are not relevant to the case of demonstrative thought with which I am concerned. E.g. Wettstein (1984) argues, very roughly, that the referent of a public “*that...*” utterance, is what a competent listener would take the speaker to be referring to given the context. So it may be that my publicly uttered claim: “*that is a rabbit*”, where I am completely fooled by a brilliantly life-like replica of my rabbit, could yet succeed in referring to the real rabbit rather than the replica I’m looking at. For perhaps a competent audience, given the context, would take my utterance to refer to the real rabbit. And perhaps the audience would arrive at this interpretation *even if* the audience knew of my mistaken belief that the replica I was looking at was the real rabbit.⁷ Nevertheless, were I to fix attention on the replica in my visual field and simply *think*: “*that is a rabbit*”, where I am fooled by the replica, my thought must refer to the replica, not the rabbit. In the case of thought, we cannot invoke an imaginary audience to overrule or overlook my mistake. The interpretation an imaginary audience would give to my demonstrative thought-element (assuming this even makes sense) is surely irrelevant, for we are considering what *I* am thinking of, not what anyone else might take a judgement to be about⁸.

4. THE PROBLEM FOR INDIRECT THEORIES

Indirect theories of visual experience are theories on which the elements in the visual field that the visual faculty delivers, the elements that the subject is directly visually aware of, are not environmental features, but rather are mental or “inner” features. So the features that visual consciousness renders immediately available for the subject to fix cognitive attention on and so demonstrate in thought – i.e. to demonstratively refer to without the need for any further

⁷ Considerations to do with the principle of charity might also support this.

⁸ An alternative reading of Snowdon’s point: In the indirect case – referring to O whilst I single out M, the subject requires knowledge that M and O are distinct. You might think this suggests that it is not really a *demonstrative* thought after all – rather one attends to M and thinks something descriptive/quantificational – like “the object (O) which is R-related (some kind of relation) to the item I’m visually attending to (M)”. The act of visual singling out is still playing *some* role here – but the reference to O here is via a descriptive/conceptual mode of presentation.

understanding on the subject's part – are inner, not environmental. We have, according to such theories, indirect awareness of the environment in virtue of having direct awareness of something else, some non-environmental intermediaries. Now, assuming the preceding account of demonstrative reference is correct; in order to successfully demonstratively refer to a feature in the environment, via a visual singling-out, one would have to have some understanding that one is (really, directly) visually aware of some inner feature that is distinct from any environmental feature. This is, I claim, a consequence of any indirect situation.

However, it is also generally accepted by indirect theorists that non-philosophers do *not* normally understand or acknowledge that in seeing the world around them, what they are really/directly visually aware of is something distinct from the environment. Indirect theorists standardly take their theory to be revisionary with respect to normal non-philosophers beliefs. Thus it seems to be a commitment of such indirect theories that most of humanity – all of the non-philosophical laity plus any direct theorists – is regularly failing to demonstratively refer to the world via attending to elements in their visual fields. And this might well seem a rather unattractive commitment for a theory to have. The precise range of demonstrative judgements that the indirect theorist is then committed to counting as false, will depend on the range of properties that the indirect theorist allows both inner items and environmental items to possess. E.g. if both sense-data and roses are allowed to be red, then a thought such as “*That* is red” might still be true despite the fact that the subject fails to realise she is mentally singling out a red sense-datum and not a red rose. But if the indirect theorist thinks that roses are red, but sense-data can only be red*, some distinct inner property of experience caused by environmental redness, then the thought is bound to be false. But whatever the exact range of potentially shared properties, it looks like the indirect theorist will end up being committed to attributing quite widespread falsity of demonstrative thoughts as a result of the widespread referential mistakes. Again, an unattractive consequence for a theory to have.

(Both Evans (1982) and Dickie (2010) argue that failing to realise one's visual experience is not of an environmental feature would mean a demonstrative formed on the basis of this experience would not refer to anything at all – one would have formed a “pseudo-thought”. Conflating a mental and a physical feature would then be different to conflating two physical items – rather than referring to the wrong item, one would have failed to refer entirely. But this is clearly no help to the indirect theorist; it is just as unattractive a consequence that most people's demonstratives fail to refer as that they mis-refer.)

Faced with this alleged consequence of their theory, an indirect theorist might respond in one of three ways:

i) They could just accept that it is indeed a consequence of indirect theories that those who do not acknowledge their (supposedly) indirect experiential position are often failing to refer to the environmental features they take themselves to refer to. E.g. Hume thought that the common man mistakenly attributes a property of their visual experience, colour, to environmental objects that do not possess such a property. But he thought that (as with our mistaken views on morality and causation) such conflation was practically harmless, or even served some purpose⁹. So the idea would be that whilst a wide range of everyday demonstrative thoughts are *strictly speaking* either false or fail to refer entirely, they are nonetheless a useful or at least harmless means by which we can guide our behaviour and actions in the world. I think it is fair to say that, dialectically speaking, one would need compelling philosophical arguments – e.g. from illusion or hallucination – before one was happy to swallow such a picture of widespread referential error or failure.

ii) The indirect theorist might want to deny that the natural pre-philosophical position is one in which people fail to grasp their indirect experiential position. They would claim instead that non-philosophers in general *would* acknowledge, if asked, that what the elements making up their visual field are all really distinct from anything in the environment. Although I don't personally find this plausible, I think it is perhaps the indirect theorist's best option. Firstly, I suppose it is ultimately an empirical question what people would or would not generally acknowledge about the nature of their visual experiences. Secondly, the prevalence of Cartesian-sceptical-style scenarios in popular culture – e.g. The Matrix etc – might be taken to suggest that the general population is quite prepared to acknowledge that what their visual awareness delivers is something distinct from anything in their physical environment. There is also perhaps anthropological evidence that humans are natural Cartesians, innately disposed to conceive of a mental realm distinct from the physical realm¹⁰.

Having said that, I think that the typical sense-data theorist's view, that their own theory is revisionary with respect to pre-philosophical beliefs, is correct. Whilst the notion of hallucination –

⁹ Descartes and Locke, in contrast, thought that this alleged metaphysical error was far from harmless, blaming it for impeding the progress of science.

¹⁰ See Boyer 2003 for anthropological evidence that belief in disembodied spirits is universal. See Kuhlmeier et al 2004, for evidence from developmental psychology that children are born dualists as they do not expect people to be subject to physical laws.

elements in the visual field that are not environmental – is no doubt part of most people’s natural understanding of how experience can *potentially* be, the idea that *all* experience similarly involves awareness of non-environmental features is not something that people would naturally acknowledge¹¹. If it were the natural view, one might wonder why so many philosophers have felt it worthwhile to provide arguments from hallucination and illusion, in the apparent belief that they are showing something novel and surprising¹². I think that cognitively unsophisticated creatures are relevant here. Young children and perhaps various animals are able, or so we naturally think, to entertain simple demonstrative thoughts about the world on the basis of their visual experience – they can wonder: “What’s *that*?”. But they lack any concept of “inner” visual experience distinct from the (apparently) worldly objects of visual awareness. Attributing widespread referential failures to children and animals etc is still quite revisionary and, *prima facie*, an unattractive consequence for a theory.

iii) The indirect theorist might seek to reject the Snowdon-style claim that understanding one is aware of a distinct, “proximal” intermediary is required for demonstrative reference to the “distal” object to succeed. I argued above that the Snowdon point is a straightforward consequence of the direct/indirect distinction once we accept that demonstrative reference is fixed by a mental singling-out action, and that there is the possibility of being mistaken about which entity one is singling out. The everyday examples I provided in support of the claim involved two environmental items – the “proximal” intermediary was environmental as well as the “distal” object. But an indirect theorist might think that failing to acknowledge a *mental* or *inner* intermediary is somehow different to the parallel mistake involving two normal, environmental objects. What goes for the environmental cases, they might argue, need not hold when sense-data or mental representations are involved. Even if one is mistaking an inner feature for some distinct environmental feature, an act of singling out the inner item from an inner visual array might still, somehow, allow for successful reference to the environmental item.

¹¹ Notice that I am *not* claiming that non-philosophers do generally hold a determinate direct view of the metaphysics of experience. Indeed I am not sure it even makes sense to speak of people having any set “pre-philosophical” opinion on a philosophical question. For this reason I dislike the label “naïve realism”. I am only claiming that the general population do not typically hold a determinately indirect view of experience. This is, of course, ultimately an empirical claim for which I offer no evidence. Still, it strikes me as very plausible and it is something that indirect theorists have also traditionally been happy to accept

¹² Admittedly it is hardly unknown for philosophers to provide arguments in support of uncontroversial theses...

One of the few indirect theorists I have encountered who explicitly considers the issue of demonstrative reference is Barry Maund (2003), who endorses this third line of thought. Maund states explicitly that:

“the naïve perceiver takes it that there is only one item there... The truth of the matter, however... is that there are two items... [and] the perceiver conflates the two.”

Nonetheless, Maund wants to maintain that:

“perceptual experiences allow us [even the naïve] to have demonstrative thoughts about such [environmental] objects as cups”.

Maund, in the spirit of Hume, wants to maintain that the “conflation of [sensory] sign and thing signified... far from being damaging, or even harmless, is in fact beneficial.” Why might the naïve confusion of environmental object and mental/sensory feature be less ruinous to demonstrative thought than conflating two environmental items? Maund’s reasoning seems to be as follows:

Maund claims that: indirect conscious awareness of environmental objects via sensory intermediaries allows for *non-dependent* demonstrative thought about those objects – i.e. allows us to demonstratively refer to the environment *even if we fail to grasp the indirect nature of our situation* – because: (i) such conscious awareness allows us to “successfully target” the environmental objects in our behaviour, and because: (ii) the awareness is *caused* (“in the right way”) by the environmental objects.

This is not a strong argument. Neither of these factors provides any reason why we should treat the case of conflating a mental intermediary with some environmental item any differently to a case in which two environmental items are conflated. Both of the factors Maund mentions – enabling successful targeting behaviour and causal connections of the right kind – might equally be present with a physical intermediary.

Consider “successful behavioural targeting” first: E.g. A cleverly located hologram of a cup may allow me to target my behaviour successfully at the actual cup – by placing the hologram in front of the actual cup I may walk in the right direction, be able to inform others of the actual cup’s location, reach towards it etc. None the less it should be clear that, despite such successful behaviour towards the actual cup, if I fail to grasp that what I am visually aware of is really a hologram rather than the cup itself then when I single out the hologram in visual field, my thought:

“*That* is made of bone china” will be false. Successful behaviour notwithstanding, I am *mistaking* a hologram for a cup; my demonstrative is, unbeknownst to me, actually latching onto something that is neither a cup nor made of china. If I were to think a thought like “*That* is on the table”, where the hologram is in fact on the table, then my thought would, fortuitously, be true, but my demonstrative would still be referring, unbeknownst to me, to the hologram I have singled out in my visual field and not to any cup.

And as for being caused “in the right way”, the problems with spelling out what this right way is exactly are notorious. But in any case, we could certainly build into the hologram example that the hologram is causally sensitive to state of the actual cup and co-varies with it to just the same degree as the proposed co-variance of sense-data and cup. The existence of causal links between a proximal intermediary and a distal object are simply irrelevant. If I have mistaken what it is that has been singled out – I have mistaken an entity distinct from the cup, for the cup itself – then demonstrative reference via that singling out will not refer to what I expect.

Since the two conditions Maund adduces make no difference when the subject is conflating two environmental items, we have no reason to think they should make any difference when the conflation involves a mental item. Conflating a sense-datum with an environmental feature is still a conflation. Until some better argument than Maund’s is provided, we should continue to conclude that indirect theorists are committed to attributing a widespread failure to refer to the environment to those who do not accept their theory.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have not been trying to provide any sort of knock-down refutation of “indirect” theories; I have merely sought to highlight an unintuitive and revisionary consequence of such theories, one that seems not to have received much mention.

There is one other issue I would like to briefly consider. Some philosophers, e.g. Austin in *Sense and Sensibilia*¹³, have complained that the distinction between direct and indirect awareness is ill-defined or unhelpful. I introduced this distinction by appealing to everyday cases in which we could be said to see something indirectly in virtue of seeing something else directly – seeing O’s shadow, seeing O’s photograph. And I offered Snowdon’s point as a way of clarifying this

¹³ Austin (1962), see in particular section II pages 15-19.

distinction. However, there remains a range of problematic cases in which it can seem quite unclear where we want to draw the line between seeing directly or indirectly. E.g. seeing O through spectacles, seeing O through a magnifying glass, through binoculars, through a telescope, through a periscope, through left-right inverting goggles, through “night-vision” goggles, via a digital movie camera in “real time”, via a digital movie camera with a 1-hour delay . . .

I do not think that Snowdon’s point helps to decide such problem cases one way or the other. The basic problem here is adjudicating whether something is a “transparent” or “invisible” medium through which we gain awareness of O itself, or whether it constitutes a distinct visible intermediary. E.g. If we accept that there is such a visible entity in the visual field as a mirror image of O, something distinct from O, then seeing O in a mirror is seeing it indirectly. Whereas if we think there is no such genuinely distinct entity as an image, then seeing O in a mirror is just an unusual way of seeing (directly) O itself, like seeing O through glass or through thin air. (The mirror would then provide a way of “transparently” looking at O itself, rather than showing a distinct image of O.) I have offered no general method for deciding whether something is just a transparent medium or constitutes an opaque intermediary¹⁴.

Still, one obvious and compelling reason for thinking there is a visible intermediary, distinct from O, in one’s visual field is if one’s visual field could *remain constant* whilst O changes or disappears. Which is, of course, just the scenario envisaged in arguments from hallucination. On this basis, any theorist who endorses awareness of a “common factor” in both a perception of O and an indistinguishable non-perceptual case would appear to be committed to the presence of an intermediary, distinct from O, in the visual field. In other words, any common-factor theory must count as an indirect theory, to which the Snowdon point would apply. I think it is fair to say that this would be disputed by most “intentionalists”. Intentional theorists are typically “common factor” theorists, indeed this is considered a main virtue of the theory. But they also typically conceive of themselves as direct theorists. McGinn is explicit on this point:

“My view is that we see objects ‘directly’ by representing them in visual experience.” (McGinn, *The Subjective View*, 1983, p.129)

Barry Maund goes so far as to claim that direct-ness is a commitment of all intentional theories:

¹⁴ Of course, the existence of vague, borderline cases does not show that there is not a perfectly good or useful distinction between cases at opposite ends of the scale. I think that Snowdon’s point shows that the distinction between direct and indirect awareness *matters* even if it doesn’t provide a sharp criterion for deciding problematic cases.

“...theorists who admit the role of representations... are all agreed that the theory is a form of direct realism: representational states are involved in perception but neither they, nor components of them, are said to be ‘objects’ for the perceiver, nor objects that constitute a veil between perceiver and the world.” (Maud, *Perception*, 2003, p7-8)

Maud surely goes too far in claiming that *all* intentionalist theorists are agreed on the direct status of such theories. For example, Tim Crane, himself a prominent intentionalist, is equally explicit in his repudiation of this direct status:

“...critics of intentionalism are right when they say that on the intentionalist view, perception ‘falls short’ of the world, and in this sense creates what Putnam calls an ‘interface’ between the mind and the world. The essence of perception – perceptual experience itself – does fall short of the world. But, according to the intentionalist, this is not something which should create any epistemological or metaphysical anxiety; it is simply a consequence of a general aspect of intentionality as traditionally conceived.” (Crane, 2006, p.141)

I think Crane is absolutely right to concede that intentionalism is an indirect view, but I do not need to pin my argument on the meanings of the phrase direct/indirect awareness¹⁵. I hope this paper will have raised a *referential* anxiety for any intentionalists who accept that experiences are essentially such that they can be common factors. A common factor must, *ex hypothesi*, be something distinct from anything environmental; and so there is the possibility of mistaking the non-environmental for something environmental. This would presumably be a mistake committed frequently by any of us who have not yet accepted that the elements making up the visual field are non-environmental elements, elements *common to perceptions and hallucinations*. If the argument of this paper has been correct, the referential difficulties that would result from such a mistake are not only an issue for avowedly indirect sense-data theories, but for any “common factor” theory.

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¹⁵ “Strong” intentionalism may in some sense be a more “direct” theory than traditional sense-data views. But there is also a clear sense in which it is not *as* “direct” as the relational/naïve-realist account. Appeals to transparency are a red herring here. Compare: (a) I give you a square object, (b) I give you a representation of a square that is not itself square, e.g. a piece of paper with the phrase “there is a square” written on it. Now suppose in case (b), for whatever reason, you are completely unable to attend to or experience the physical paper or the ink or the size or font of the letters etc. You *only* gain conscious awareness of the *representational content* of the paper. This would be an instance of transparency in the relevant sense. Still there is a perfectly clear difference between (a) and (b) – in one case one is provided with an instance of actual squareness, in the other one is provided with a representation of squareness.

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