Seeing Objects and Surfaces, and the 'In Virtue Of' Relation

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1. Introduction

One of the most well-known and influential analyses in the philosophy of perception is Frank Jackson's analysis in chapter 1 of his book *Perception*,[1] where he uses the 'in virtue of' relation to ground the distinction between immediate and mediate perception. Jackson argues that one consequence of doing so is that even if our perception of physical objects is not mediated by mental objects (such as Locke and other representative realists envisaged), our perception of physical objects is never direct, because it mediated by our perceiving their facing surfaces. I shall argue that this is false, and that our perception of physical objects (even if it is mediated by mental objects) is not mediated by perception of their facing surfaces. I also show that the examples Jackson uses to illustrate the 'in virtue of' relation support my view, not his. It follows from this that the 'in virtue of' relation is an inadequate basis for the direct-indirect distinction.

2. 'In virtue of'

Jackson's aim in chapter 1 is to give an analysis of the distinction between direct and indirect perception, or (what I take to be the same thing) between immediate and mediate perception, and thus provide us with a useful and clear way of telling (depending on what theory of perception one holds) which are the immediate objects of perception, and which are not.

Jackson's analysis makes crucial use of the 'in virtue of' relation.[2] He points out that sometimes a statement to the effect that an x is F is to be analysed in terms of something else, y, being F. He says he will use the phrase 'in virtue of' to describe such cases—in such cases, x is said to be F 'in virtue of' y being F.

[1] F. Jackson, *Perception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

[2] Op. cit. note 1, 15–20.

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Some of his examples will help illustrate this relation:

(1) Jackson lives in Australia *in virtue of* his living in Melbourne.
(2) A car is red *in virtue of* its body being red.
(3) A car touches the kerb *in virtue of* one of its front tyres touching the kerb.

3. Direct and indirect perception

Jackson then proceeds to his analysis of perception. He proposes that an object is mediately perceived if it is perceived, but only in virtue of another object being perceived. An object is immediately perceived if it is perceived, and it is not perceived in virtue of another object being perceived.[3]

Jackson then argues as follows. A physical object is not identical to its facing surface. They are distinct entities. But whenever we perceive an object, it is in virtue of perceiving the facing surface of the object. That is, the statement 'the subject *S* perceives physical object *x*' is to be analysed in terms of *S* perceiving something other than *x*, namely *x*'s facing surface. This entails that physical objects are not immediate objects of perception, because they are perceived in virtue of their facing surfaces being perceived. Physical objects are therefore only mediately or indirectly perceived. As Jackson says, 'reasonably sized, opaque material things are never the immediate objects of perception'.[4]

This conclusion is supposed to be independent of whether a 'mental object' theory of perception is true. For example, in *Perception* Jackson goes on to defend a traditional representative realist theory of perception. According to this theory, physical objects (and, for that matter, their facing surfaces) are not immediately perceived, because they are perceived in virtue of mental objects being perceived. But even if no such theory were true, and we do not perceive physical objects in virtue of being aware of mental objects, Jackson's analysis of the direct/indirect distinction will still entail that physical objects are never directly perceived. Even if something like naïve realism were true, the facing surfaces of objects would be the immediate objects of perception; physical objects themselves would not.

[3] Op. cit. note 1, 19–20.
[4] Op. cit. note 1, 20.

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4. The case against Jackson's analysis

Although my sympathies are with indirect realism, I will argue that it is misguided to think that the perception of physical objects is mediated by the perception of their facing surfaces. I have no quarrel with Jackson's claim that we perceive physical objects in virtue of perceiving their facing surfaces. My claim is just that, properly understood, this provides no reason for thinking that our perception of physical objects is in any way indirect.

A closer look at Jackson's examples will help me make this claim convincing. Jackson points out that he lives in Australia in virtue of living in Melbourne, which is distinct from Australia (that is, the statement that he lives in Australia should be analysed in terms of his living in Melbourne). This is obviously true, and I have no quarrel with this claim. But it would be absurd to then say that because of this, Jackson's living in Australia is somehow *mediated* by his living in Melbourne, or that it is in any way indirect. His living in Australia just consists in his living in a part of it, in this case Melbourne.

Or consider Jackson's red car example. He says that the car is red in virtue of its body being red. This is true. But it would make no sense to take this as a reason for thinking that the car is somehow only indirectly red, and that its redness is in any way mediated by its body being red. The car being red just is a matter of its body being red.

So not only do Jackson's examples fail to support his understanding of the direct-indirect distinction, they actually tell against his view, because they cannot be considered to involve any indirectness.

If we turn now to perception, we can see that we should say the same sort of thing as we did with Jackson's examples. To see an object *just is* to see a (big enough) part of it. In other words, seeing the facing surface of an object is what seeing the object consists in.[5] For instance, seeing the facing surface of an apple is what seeing this apple consists in. So although it certainly is true that we see the

[5] This is not to deny that there may be other ways of seeing an object. For example, some philosophers claim that you can see a person even if they are completely covered in clothes. (See, for example, B. P. McLaughlin, 'Perception, Causation and Supervenience', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy Vol. 9: Causation and Causal Theories,* P. A. French *et al* (eds.) (Minneapolis: Univ. Minnesota, 1984), 569–91). This issue is not relevant to my purposes here, although I explain how to handle such cases in 'The Potential Information Analysis of Seeing' (to be published).

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apple in virtue of seeing its facing surface, it is false to say that because of this our perception here is mediate. It isn't mediated by seeing its facing surface. Rather, our seeing the facing surface of the apple is itself the seeing of the apple. There aren't two cases of perceiving going on here, the direct perceiving of the surface, and the indirect seeing of the apple. There is just one, the perceiving of the surface of the apple, which is itself a perceiving of the apple.

To think otherwise, as Jackson does, is not only counter-intuitive and unsupported, but requires us to understand the relatively straight-forward 'in virtue of' locution in a different way than we do in all other cases where it is used (including those cases that Jackson himself relied upon).

5. Touching

We can also see that Jackson's view is false if we compare seeing with another sense, that of touch. I can touch a car in virtue of touching one of its parts, such as one of its doors. (Or, looking back at (3), the car can touch the kerb in virtue of one of its tyres doing so). This does not make my touching of the car in any way indirect, or in any way mediated by my touching of the door. In touching a part of the car, namely the door, I thereby, by that very act, touch the car. Similarly, in touching the kerb with its tyre, the car thereby touches the kerb. (Or consider burning. The fact that I am burned by an object in virtue of being burned by its surface does not mean that I am only indirectly burned by the object.)

All this is obvious enough. But the same is true of seeing. In seeing a part of an object, such as its facing surface, I thereby see the object. I no more see the object indirectly as a result of this than that I touch the car indirectly. Unless it can be shown that seeing is somehow relevantly different than touching (and burning), there is no reason to accept Jackson's claims.

6. Rejection of Jackson's analysis

So if my reasoning is correct, then our perception of physical objects is not mediated by our perception of their surfaces. Furthermore, it must follow that the 'in virtue of' relation is an inadequate basis for the direct-indirect perception distinction. There is nothing false about saying that an object is perceived in virtue of its facing surface being perceived, just as there is nothing

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false about saying that Jackson lives in Australia in virtue of his living in Melbourne. But this fact will lead, on Jackson's view of the direct-indirect distinction, to the false conclusion that our perception of objects is mediated by our perception of their surfaces. Therefore Jackson's view of the direct-indirect distinction must be false.

7. Counter-objections

I consider now some possible counter-replies to my argument.

Reply 1. You claim that the seeing of the surface and the seeing of the apple are one and the same perception. But I can see the front surface of an apple even when the rest of it has been taken away and destroyed. That is, I can see the front surface whether or not the rest of the apple exists. So how can my seeing of the apple consist in seeing the front surface if I can see that front surface without seeing the apple?

We can easily see that there is no problem here if we consider touching again. I touch the car in virtue of touching the door. There is another possible world where I touch that door, but do not succeed in touching the car, because the door is not connected to the car. But no-one would think that this means that my touching of the car and of the door are separate acts, or that my touching of the car is mediated by my touching of the door.

Seeing is no different. If the front surface of the apple is connected to the rest of the apple, I see the apple by seeing that front surface. If the front surface is not connected to the rest of the apple (if, say, the skin has been peeled from the apple), then I do not succeed in seeing the apple by seeing the surface. There is no problem with any of this, any more than there is with touching.[6]

Reply 2. The seeing of the skin must be a different act of perception than the seeing of the apple, because there is a greater epistemic move required to get to the existence of the apple than to the existence of the skin. In other words, we are more entitled to believe in the existence of the skin than in the existence of the apple. Hence, the perception of the skin must be direct, and the perception of the rest of the apple indirect, mediated by the direct perception of the skin.

[6] Note that I do not claim (nor do I have to) that the identity between the act of seeing the object and the act of seeing the part is necessary. It does not hold across all possible worlds.

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First of all, we should note that this objection is not open to Jackson, who explicitly rejects any epistemic element in the immediate-mediate distinction.[7]

But even if we waive this point (and supposing we grant the epistemic claim being made, which I am inclined to do), the objection does not succeed. Consider touching the car again. No-one would say that your touching of the car is a separate act of touching than the touching of the door, or that the former is an indirect act of touching which is mediated by the latter. Yet it is the case that, if your only basis for belief about the car is your touching (suppose, for example, that you are blind), you have more reason to believe in the door than in the car. But this fact does not make it the case that your touching of the car is anything other, or anything more indirect, than the touching of the door. Seeing is the same in this respect: the fact that we have more reason to believe in the skin than the apple does not mean we saw the apple indirectly. There is no reason to think that there is a relevant difference between touching and seeing here.

If seeing an object can be achieved by just seeing a part of it, as I claim, then there is every reason to expect that in seeing an object, we will be more secure in believing that that part exists, than that the rest of the object exists. After all, there is no reason to think that seeing x guarantees that we will have (knowingly or not) good reasons to believe all the true statements that can be made about x's physical appearance. While there is undoubtedly some link between seeing x and having grounds for belief in x, it is not that simple.

Bear in mind that the claim that you see an object is not the claim that you see every part of the object. To say that you see the apple is not to say that you see the back of the apple, or the inside. It is just to say that you see the apple.[8] One can see an apple merely by seeing a part of it. The fact that there is a further inference involved in judging that the rest of the apple exists does not mean that (given that the apple is there) you aren't seeing it (by seeing that part).

Reply 3. I drop the claim that there are two separate acts of perception. What I should claim is that there is only the one act, which is both a direct perceiving of the surface, and an indirect perceiving of the object.

This solves nothing. If we applied this sort of view to touching, we'd say that the touching of the car involves just the one act of

[7] Op. cit. note 1, 6–12.

[8] It may be that the sceptics are right and you aren't really justified on the basis of your visual experience in saying that an apple exists here—but this does not change the fact that if it exists, you're seeing it.

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touching, and that this act of touching is both a direct act of touching the door, and an indirect touching of the car. This is not so—our touching of the car is not indirect. Nor is this sort of view true of seeing.

Reply 4. We're stipulating our own definition of direct and indirect perception, so it's inappropriate to say that the definition is false.

A definition of direct and indirect perception must fit with our intuitive ideas about perception, and Jackson's does not. It gives rise to absurd views about perception. It requires us to treat the one act of perception as two separate acts. It also requires that we interpret the phrase 'in virtue of' differently in perceptual situations than in other cases where we use the phrase, for no good reason. Therefore, it is inadequate.[9]

8. The 'strictly speaking' view

I consider now a view that is similar to Jackson's.[10] This is a view that is sometimes expressed by philosophers or students, although usually not very clearly or consistently. There are three different versions of this view that could be offered.

(1) 'Strictly speaking', we never really see objects, only their surfaces.
(2) In the strict or philosophical sense of 'see', we don't see objects, just their surfaces. However, although strictly speaking it is false to say that we see objects, it is acceptable in non-philosophical contexts to 'speak with the vulgar', and say that we see them, just as we can say in ordinary contexts that the sun moves around the Earth. But this talk should not be taken literally—literally speaking, it is false.
(3) In the strict or philosophical sense of 'see', we don't see objects, just their surfaces. However, there is another looser, non-philosophical sense of 'see', in which it is true that we see

[9] Note also that Jackson is happy to talk of rival analyses of the direct/indirect distinction being false (op. cit. note 1, 6).

[10] See, for example, G. E. Moore, 'A Reply to My Critics', *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore: Vol. II*, P. A. Schlipp (ed.) (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1942), 632; C. D. Broad, *The Mind and Its Place in Nature* (London: Kegan Paul), 148ff; and D. M. Armstrong, 'Perception, Sense-Data and Causality', *The Nature of Mind* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1980), 135–6.

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> objects. What we cannot say is that we see objects in the same sense as we see their surfaces.[11]

When the 'strictly speaking' view is put forward, it is often unclear just what version is being offered, and sometimes more than one version is.[12] I claim that all of these versions are false.

The only defence of such views that gets offered is the obvious point that when we see an object, we do not see all parts of it, just its facing surface. But this will only entail that we do not see an object, or that we see it only in some vulgar or different sense, if it true that to see an object, you must see all parts of it. But no good defence of such a claim has ever been offered, and it is highly counter-intuitive. Whoever thought that you had to see all parts of an object to see it? Seeing an object is just to see a part of it. So *strictly speaking* we *do* see objects, and not in any different sense of 'see', and not in any non-literal vulgar way either.

In other words, those who put forward such views are merely struggling to express the correct claim that we do not see all parts of an object, and that our seeing of an object is a matter of seeing just a part of it. To express this clearly, all they need say is that in seeing an object, one does not see all parts of it. There is no need to deny that it is seen, or to claim that it is seen in some different sense of 'see'.

The situation is the same as with touching. The fact that you don't touch all parts of an object doesn't mean that you don't touch it, nor does it mean that you only touch it in some loose, non-literal sense, or in a different sense than the sense in which you touch the part. You literally touch, for example, the door and the car, and in the same sense of 'touch', and you literally see the object and its facing surface, and in the same sense of 'see'.[13]

[11] As Jackson does not deny that we literally see objects, his view is closest to (3). But note that while he also holds that there is a difference in the directness between seeing surfaces and seeing objects, nowhere does he explicitly say that there are different *senses* of 'see' involved in seeing objects and seeing surfaces, so I take it that his view is distinct from (3).

[12] Armstrong, for example, says 'there seems to be a clear sense in which when, as we say, somebody sees an apple, "in truth and strictness" ... they see something far less. They see a much smaller object...' (op. cit. note 10, 136). But later in the same paragraph he endorses Jackson's view that we do actually see the object, although only in virtue of seeing its surface.

[13] There is certainly nothing in the 'in virtue of' relation to support the 'strictly speaking' view. One would hardly claim that Jackson, strictly speaking, does not live in Australia, but only Melbourne, or that he lives in Australia in a different sense, or a non-literal sense, than the sense in which he lives in Melbourne.

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9. A comparison with a theory that clearly involves indirect perception

I finish by comparing the view that perception of physical objects is mediated by perception of their facing surfaces with the Lockean view that perception of physical objects is mediated by perception or awareness of mental objects.

We can easily see how it would be true to say that on the latter theory, our perception of physical objects is mediated, and almost everyone would say this. The mental objects 'stand between' us and the physical objects, and represent the objects to us. This is not to say that we can easily specify what *exactly* it is about this situation that makes the perception indirect, as centuries of argument has demonstrated. Nevertheless, no-one would doubt that were such a situation the way we actually see, our perception of physical objects would clearly be in some way indirect, mediated by the mental objects.

But compare this with the former view. Suppose that there are no mental objects, and something like naïve realism is true. Do we really want to say that the surfaces of objects 'stand between' us and physical objects in the way that Lockean mental objects (if they existed) would? Clearly they don't represent the objects to us in the way that mental objects would. Surely there is a complete difference in the two cases, and that difference is that the surfaces of physical objects are part of the objects, whereas mental objects are not in any way part of physical objects. And it makes no sense to say that a part of an object stands between the object and ourselves in the way that a mental object would. (One might as well say 'I can't get to touch this object, the front part of it is standing in my way'.)

It might be replied that of course there are such differences between the two cases, but that this does not prove that facing surfaces do not also mediate perception—it is just that the mediation is different in the two sorts of cases. However, this misses the point that what we want with a definition of the direct-indirect distinction is an analysis that explains just why some theories of perception, such as Locke's, are (as all would agree) best described as indirect. It is the difference between Lockean theories and direct realist theories that such an analysis needs to elucidate,[14] and Jackson's distinction does not do this; rather, it lumps them together.[15]

[14] Of course we know that there is one important difference, namely that Lockeanism has mental objects, and direct realism does not, but we need further explanation of just why perception on the former theory is indirect.

[15] This is not to make an *a priori* judgment that no analysis can possibly

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10. Conclusion

In conclusion, then, Jackson's analysis of the direct-indirect perception distinction cannot be right. It is true that we perceive physical objects in virtue of perceiving their facing surfaces, but this does not mean that the latter perception mediates the former in any meaningful or useful sense of mediate. Hence no analysis of why such theories of perception as Lockeanism are indirect can rely on the 'in virtue of' relation.[16]

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[16] I have greatly benefited by discussing these issues with Bill Fish. Where we agree, and where we disagree, can be partly gauged by looking at W. Fish, 'The Direct/Indirect Distinction in Contemporary Philosophy of Perception', *Essays in Philosophy* 5 No. 1 (http://www.humboldt.edu/~essays/, 2004). Thanks also to David Lewis, Stephen Hetherington, John O-Leary Hawthorne, and Bill Joske.

be correct if it classes naïve realism as indirect—a brilliant enough analysis may convince us that it should be. But Jackson's analysis does not convince, and faces severe problems.

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