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## The Real World Regained? Searle's External Realism Examined

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### Abstract

In *Mind, Language, and Society: Philosophy in the Real World*, John Searle presents an uncompromising apologia for realism which is distinguished both by its lucidity and by its vigour. His basic strategy is to show that realists have at their disposal the resources needed to refute skeptics who allege that a mind-independent world is unknowable. In this paper, I reconstruct Searle's principal pro-realist argument (Section 3), then argue that it is vitiated by its reliance on two unwarranted assumptions (Sections 4-6). First, however, I summarize the position—"external realism"—Searle defends (Section 2).

### 1 Introduction

In *Mind, Language, and Society: Philosophy in the Real World* [43] John Searle presents an uncompromising *apologia* for realism which is distinguished both by its lucidity and by its vigour. As befits a philosopher with a well-known penchant for no-holds-barred polemical exchanges,<sup>1</sup> Searle strenuously defends his brand of external realism against all comers: old-fashioned idealists and phenomenologists, new-fangled anti-realists and neo-pragmatists, radical social constructivists, perspectivists and postmodernists of all stripes.<sup>2</sup> His

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Nagel, in his review of Searle [41], describes Searle as "a dragonslayer by temperament" [32, p. 96]. Similarly, the dust jacket blurb for Searle [40] celebrates the philosopher as "a true prize fighter" who has taken on philosophical opponents as diverse as Derrida and Chomsky.

<sup>2</sup>For Searle's views on social constructivism, see [42]. Note that Searle's defence of external realism is part of

basic strategy is as simple as it is bold: to show that realists have at their disposal the resources needed to refute skeptics who allege that a mind-independent world is effectively an unknowable *Ding an sich*, or a world forever beyond our ken.

In what follows, I shall reconstruct Searle's principal pro-realist argument (Section 3), then argue that it is vitiated by its reliance on two unwarranted assumptions (Sections 4-6). First, however, we need to be sure we understand the position—"external realism"—Searle wants to defend (Section 2).

### 2 What is External Realism?

"Realism" is a notoriously vague and ambiguous term.<sup>3</sup> Happily, however, Searle offers us a brief and tolerably clear description of his "external realism", which he glosses as the view that "there is a real world existing independently of us" [43, p. 14]. Let us then define Searlean external realism as follows:

**External Realism (ER)** The thesis that "there exists a real world that is totally independent of human beings and of what they think or say about it" [43, p. 13] or, alternatively, that "there is a way that things are independently of our representations" [43, p. 31]. That is, the world is independent of our representations, perceptions, minds, languages, or conceptual schemes.

Given this characterization of ER, it is easy to see why Searle declares it incompatible with "idealism", a catch-all term Searle uses for views according to which "reality is ultimately [...] constituted by our perceptions and other sorts of representations" [43, p. 16].<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, Searle urges that Berkeley, Kant, and Hegel are

a larger philosophical project: the vindication of what he calls the "Enlightenment vision", or the view that reality is intelligible and that we can comprehend its nature [43, pp. 2-6]. For a critical discussion of this aspect of Searle's work, see Rorty [37].

<sup>3</sup>See Lycan [23, pp. 189ff] for some witty and astute observations on this topic.

<sup>4</sup>For other ways of understanding idealism, see Rescher [35, Figure 18.1.]

all sworn enemies of ER, as are a number of recent philosophers—Hilary Putnam, Nelson Goodman, Richard Rorty, Thomas Kuhn, and Jacques Derrida—for whom the world is not so much found as it is fashioned by languages, paradigms, categories, or conceptual schemes.

### 3 The Vindication of External Realism: Searle's Master Argument

Having elucidated the content of ER, we are now in a position to scrutinize Searle's attempted vindication of it. We may reconstruct his argument—which I shall call Searle's "Master Argument"—as follows:

#### The Master Argument:

- (P1) If there are no cogent arguments against ER, we are justified in accepting ER.
  - (P2) If ER is not vulnerable to skepticism about our knowledge of the external world, then there are no cogent arguments against ER.
  - (P3) ER is vulnerable to skepticism only if direct realism is false.
  - (P4) Direct realism is true.
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- ∴ (C) We are justified in accepting ER.  
(P1-P4)

Because the Master Argument is formally valid, the only question is whether its premises are true. Since the remainder of this essay will be given over to a critical examination of premises (P3) and (P4), I shall say very little about (P1) and (P2) here. Nevertheless, a few brief comments about this latter pair of assumptions are in order.

We may begin with (P1). What grounds this premise, ultimately, is Searle's conviction that "[e]xternal realism is not a theory" [43, p. 32] but is instead what he calls a "default position", that is, a fundamental presupposition of inquiry and discourse which we hold prereflectively and which forms part of the so-called "Background" of our thought and language [43, p. 9f]. Although Searle concedes that not all default positions are true [43, p. 11], he maintains that there is a *prima facie* presumption in favour of them, so that "any

departure from them requires [...] a convincing argument" [43, p. 11].<sup>5</sup> And once we allow that those who oppose a default position must shoulder the burden of proof, we are well on our way to (P1), provided we grant ER is in fact a default position.

Two points need to be made about (P2). First, Searle is not saying that the epistemological objection to ER is the *only* argument against it. On the contrary: he discusses a range of stock anti-realist arguments, which he rapidly dissects and deftly counters.<sup>6</sup> What Searle stresses, however, is that epistemological considerations have long led philosophers to jettison realism—so much so, in fact, that he regards the complaint that realism renders reality unknowable as the main argument against ER [43, p. 26f]. And—this brings us to our second point—this observation seems just: the accusation that realism puts the world permanently beyond our ken was made by old-fashioned idealists such as Berkeley [7, §4, §18-§20], Kant [19, A367ff], Fichte [14, p. 45], and Schopenhauer [39, II: I, 10], and has been revived by Rorty, Putnam, and Goodman.<sup>7</sup> In light of this, (P2) is not without a certain plausibility.

That is all I intend to say about (P1) and (P2). While I do not deny that there may be problems with these two premises, I propose to grant them, at least for the sake of argument, and focus instead on premises (P3) and (P4). The latter two assumptions will give Searle's critics more than enough ammunition to use against him—or so, at any rate, I shall now argue.

### 4 Skepticism, Direct Realism and Representationalism

Let's begin with (P3), which is built around a familiar intuition—namely, that the skeptic can

<sup>5</sup>For a broadly similar way of understanding of realism, see Nagel [31, 33].

<sup>6</sup>He reviews four anti-realists arguments in all; cf. [43, pp. 20-26]. Several of these arguments are discussed in greater detail by Alston [1], whom Searle cites with approval [43, p. 168].

<sup>7</sup>For a discussion of this argument in Rorty, Putnam, Goodman, Kuhn, and others, see McDermid [25].

succeed only if he can discredit direct realism.<sup>8</sup> What is meant here by “direct realism”, however? What I shall call *generic direct realism* can be represented as the conjunction of three theses:

**Generic direct realism (GDR):**

- (1) that physical objects are mind-independent;
- (2) that physical objects are perceivable and knowable; and
- (3) that we can perceive these objects *directly*, or without epistemic intermediaries (i.e. – there is no subjective representation or private mental object which we must perceive in order to perceive a physical object).<sup>9</sup>

Unlike Searle, who is prepared to endorse theses (1), (2), and (3), his skeptical adversary admits only thesis (1), denying (2) and (3). More specifically, the skeptic’s rejection of (2) is supposedly grounded in his denial of (3), just as Searle’s affirmation of (2) is rooted in his commitment to (3). For both sides, then, it appears that the fundamental issue is whether (3)—the thesis that “[w]e have direct perceptual access to [the] world through our senses” [43, p. 10]—is to be affirmed or denied.

**4.1 Skepticism and Direct Realism**

Bearing all this in mind, we are now in a position to take a closer look at **(P3)**, which states that the falsity of GDR is a *sine qua non* or necessary condition for generating skepticism. According to **(P3)**, the skeptic must reject GDR in favour of the view that perceptual experience forms a “veil of ideas” that interposes itself between mind and world. But must the skeptic be so committed?

That is very far from obvious. Recall that the skeptic’s initial move is simply to remind us that our beliefs about the way the world is depend epistemically on the testimony of our senses, inasmuch the way things appear to us functions as a source

<sup>8</sup>There is a slight terminological difference, inasmuch as Searle uses the term “perceptual realism” [43, p. 29] instead of the more standard “direct realism”.

<sup>9</sup>For some clarification of the notion of “directness”, see McDermid [26].

of evidence or justification. Since sensory experience is thus supposed to confer warrant upon our beliefs, those beliefs cannot amount to knowledge unless appearances actually are a trustworthy or reliable guide to reality; the mere fact that there seems to be a book in front of *S* is not a reason for *S* to believe that there really is an book unless *S* is right in assuming that how things look can (often or usually) yield the truth about how they actually are. Since, however, the true relation between appearance and reality cannot be known unless reality itself is already known, any reply to the skeptic that appeals to that relation is impermissibly circular, because it presupposes the very thing the skeptic denies—namely, knowledge of the way the world is.<sup>10</sup> Or, to put the matter in a slightly different way: if my belief that, say, there is a green mug on the desk is ultimately based on my sensory experience, and if it is always possible that my experience is non-veridical or delusive (as in a dream or hallucination), then how can such a belief be warranted and justified so as to amount to knowledge?

It will readily be seen that, whatever its weaknesses, the above argument for skepticism makes no explicit appeal to a “veil of perception” doctrine. Yet what, it will be asked, about the references to “sensory experience”, “appearances”, and “the testimony of the senses”? The answer is that such talk need not be construed in terms of a theory which holds that the direct objects of perceptual awareness are subjective representations (or “ideas”, “impressions”, or “sense-data”). Indeed, the skeptic’s invocation of “sensory experience” only requires us to concede a pair of platitudes. Let us look briefly at both.

**4.2 Two Platitudes**

i. The first platitude is a banal distinction between appearance and reality, according to which things are not always as they seem, and perception is not necessarily veridical. Now, since any remotely credible philosophical theory of perception—be it direct realism, a sense datum theory, or an adverbial account—must find a way to accommodate

<sup>10</sup>See Chapters 1 and 4 of Greco [16], for a careful development of this sort of skeptical argument.

this distinction, Searle must think the direct realism he favours can make sense of this elementary contrast between appearance and reality<sup>11</sup>, in which case he surely cannot quarrel with the skeptic's invocation of it.

ii. The second platitude is that any knowledge of the external world we possess is mediated by our senses, in the sense that perceptual experience is a source of evidence or epistemic justification.<sup>12</sup> Note, however, that there is no inconsistency between affirming the minimal empiricism this doctrine embodies and denying the doctrine of representationalism, which affirms that all we know directly are our perceptions, understood as a medium of private *Vorstellungen* epistemically prior to public material objects.<sup>13</sup> Once we have distinguished minimal empiricism from representationalism and seen that the former doctrine does not entail the latter, there seems no good reason to maintain that the case for skepticism cannot get off the ground unless thesis (3) of GDR is false. Hence it would seem a grave mistake to say, with Searle, that “[o]nce we reject the idea that all we ever perceive are our own perceptions, then we have no epistemic basis for denying external realism” [43, p. 31].

## 5 Direct Realism Revisited

If the arguments advanced in the last section are basically on the right track, then we have good reason to regard Searle's premise **(P3)** as ill-founded. We now need to determine whether we are entitled to entertain similar reservations about **(P4)**.

Note that Searle advances no positive argument in favour of **(P4)**. (This is not surprising, of course, since direct realism is included on his list of default positions) [43, p. 10]. Instead, he offers brief rebuttals to what he calls “the two most

famous refutations” of GDR [43, p. 28]. Let us carefully consider what he has to say about each.

### 5.1 The Argument from Science

Searle has no trouble disposing of the first would-be refutation: the so-called “argument from science” [43, p. 28f].<sup>14</sup> Here the idea is that since perceptual experience of material objects is the last link in a lengthy causal chain—a chain which stretches all the way from the object which stimulates my sense organs to certain goings-on in my brain and central nervous system—perception cannot be direct or immediate. The argument runs as follows:

- (1) Perceptual experience (e.g. seeing a tree) is (causally) mediated by a lengthy and complex series of neuro-physiological processes.

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∴ (C) GDR is false: perception of the physical world cannot be direct.

Searle points out, rightly, that this is a blatant non sequitur:

“This argument seems to me fallacious. From the fact that I can give a causal account of how it comes about that I see the real world, it doesn't follow that I don't see the real world [...] There is no inconsistency between asserting, on the one hand, “I directly perceive a tree,” and asserting, on the other, “There is a sequence of physical and neurobiological events that produce in me the experience I describe as “seeing the tree”” ” [43, p. 28f].

Expressed in terms of our reconstruction, Searle's complaint is that the move from (1)—the claim that perception is causally mediated—to (C)—the claim that perception of the physical world is *epistemically* mediated (in the sense that my perceptual awareness of physical objects ultimately depends upon my perception of my subjective rep-

<sup>11</sup>For more on this point, see the arguments against direct realism described in Section 6.

<sup>12</sup>Some philosophers—Rorty [36], Davidson [11]—have denied this and have held that although experience *causes* our beliefs, it cannot serve as a source of evidence for them; for critical commentary, see McDermid [25, 27]. But Searle does not take this line.

<sup>13</sup>I take the term “minimal empiricism” from McDowell [29].

<sup>14</sup>Incidentally, it is rather odd to give this argument as much importance as Searle does, since there are several other objections to GDR which have been more prominent historically. See Section 6, below.

representational states)—is invalid. Once we distinguish causal mediation from its epistemic counterpart, we can see that the Argument from Science poses no threat to the direct realist, whose position would be fatally compromised only by the introduction of epistemic intermediaries (i.e. – by the admission that the immediate objects of perceptual acquaintance are mental representations).

Searle's reply to this version of the Argument from Science therefore seems absolutely correct.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, we may well wonder if he hasn't made things too easy for himself by focussing exclusively on a rather weak version of the argument. For we can, I think, easily imagine a superior version of the Argument from Science which, while eschewing the clumsy and straightforward conflation of causal with epistemic mediation, nevertheless aspires to show that direct realism cannot be taken seriously once we have a detailed scientific understanding of the specific *ways* in which our perception of the physical world is causally mediated by neurophysiological processes.

Here is a sketch of one way such an argument might unfold. If we are persuaded by the work of psychologists of perception (such as that discussed in [21] and [44]) or neurophysiologists such as J.C. Eccles [13] we will readily appreciate the extent to which perceptual output—say, the visual experience I have when I look at a Necker cube or at one of Rubin's figure / ground reversing figures—is underdetermined by raw sensory input or stimuli. This makes it possible to argue that perceptions of the physical world are not ready-made or given to the mind but are instead constructed or assembled by a set of complicated processes—processes which, far from merely receiving and transmitting the information contained in the raw data of sensation, actively interpret such data by synthesizing it and projecting an order onto it. If this is indeed the case—and whether it is the case is plainly an empirical question—then direct realism is put on the defensive; for how can the immediate objects of perception be reckoned wholly objective or mind-independent if they are inescapably conditioned or constituted by such subject-derived processes?

<sup>15</sup>For a similar criticism of the Argument from Science, see: [3, 22, 9, 10].

Whatever the merits of this revised version of the Argument from Science are—and obviously we lack space to discuss them in any meaningful way here—it is crucially important to see that, unlike the simple-minded version scouted by Searle, the revised version does not contend that perception of the physical world must be epistemically mediated simply *because* it is causally mediated. Instead, it maintains that direct realism is untenable because the scientific study of perception indicates that perception's immediate objects are partially *formed* or *constituted* by certain neurophysiological and psychological processes. Hence Searle's sole objection to the original, weaker version of the argument is not sufficient to refute the modified version sketched in the preceding paragraph.

## 5.2 The Argument from Illusion

Searle is similarly dismissive of the second objection to direct realism: the venerable Argument from Illusion. Here is his statement of it:

“[T]he person who thinks that we directly perceive objects and states of affairs in the world, the naive perceptual realist, cannot deal with the fact that there is no way of distinguishing the case where I really do see objects and states of affairs in the world, the so-called “veridical” case, from the case where I am having some sort of illusion, hallucination, delusion, and so on. Therefore, perceptual realism is false”  
[43, p. 29].

To clarify matters, it will once again be helpful to have before us an outline of the argument in question which identifies both its starting-point and its conclusion. Here is the partial reconstruction I propose:

- (1) For any veridical perceptual state  $P$  (e.g. –  $S$  seeing a large red tomato on yonder table), it is possible for there to be a non-veridical or delusive perceptual state  $P'$  which is subjectively indistinguishable from  $P$  (i.e. – which is phenomenologically as if  $S$  were seeing a large red tomato on yonder table, although no such tomato is actually present to  $S$ ).

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∴ (C) GDR is false: the immediate objects of veridical perception are not mind-independent physical objects, but mental representations (as in  $P'$ ).

Searle is completely unimpressed by the Argument from Illusion. Why? First, because he thinks it assumes that if there is no qualitative or introspectible difference between my actually seeing a real tree in the quad and my vividly dreaming (or hallucinating) that I am seeing a tree, then we are left with no reliable way to distinguish between veridical perceptual experience and its counterfeit or non-veridical counterpart. He insists, however, that although “[t]he single experience, considered in isolation by itself, is not sufficient to make the distinction between veridical perception and hallucination” [43, p. 31], we can nevertheless distinguish our veridical perceptions from hallucinations and dreams (and thus know when we are actually seeing trees) by appealing to considerations of coherence, or determining how a given experience is related to one’s “network of other experiences” [43, p. 30].

This riposte is totally irrelevant, however. Champions of the Argument from Illusion need not commit themselves to anything like the adventitious epistemological assumption Searle saddles them with, viz., that we cannot *know* that we are not dreaming but actually seeing a tree unless there is “some internal feature of the experience itself that is sufficient to distinguish the veridical experience from a hallucination of the object” [43, p. 30]. Their initial claim is just that “[t]he single experience [...] is not sufficient to make the distinction between veridical perception and hallucination” [43, p. 31]. Since Searle grants this [43, p. 31], his first objection to the argument misses the mark.

This brings us to a second, more promising objection, in which Searle registers his opposition to the idea that GDR “requires that there be a distinction in the qualitative character of my visual experiences between veridical and non-veridical perceptual experiences” [43, p. 31]. It is simply not the case, we are told, that “in order for me to be seeing the object in front of me, there must be some internal feature of the experience itself that is sufficient to distinguish the veridical experience from a hallucination of the object” [43, p. 31]. Here his point, it would appear, is that the claim that the direct object of  $P$  is not mind-independent does not actually follow from the claim that  $P$  and  $P'$  are subjectively indistinguishable (allowing that the immediate objects of awareness in cases like  $P'$  are mind-dependent representations). I take it, moreover, that Searle thinks this does not follow because he repudiates the following principle:

- (2) If two perceptual states are subjectively indistinguishable, then their immediate objects—what is directly before the mind or immediately present to consciousness in both cases—belong to the same ontological type.

This principle is surely not self-evident, and Searle is not the only philosopher who has viewed it with suspicion [4, 28, 2, 34]. Nevertheless, Searle says next to nothing about why we should reject (2). So his critique of the Argument from Illusion is very far from conclusive.

## 6 More Opposition to Direct Realism

Even if Searle’s treatment of the Argument from Illusion were satisfactory, however, direct realism would still be exposed to a number of noteworthy objections—objections which Searle fails to consider, let alone refute. To give a sense of the difficulties facing (P4), I shall now outline two classic arguments directed against GDR.

### 6.1 The Time Lag Argument

The following argument is based on the fact that light takes time to travel and runs as follows:

“Suppose *S* looks up at the night sky and indulges in some star-gazing. Unbeknownst to *S*, the distant star she is looking at no longer exists, having burnt out one hundred years ago, though its light is reaching Earth only now. Thus although *S*'s visual experience is just as it would be if the star existed, and although *S* directly perceives some object, it can't be the star (unless we wish to deny that the direct objects of perception must exist when perceived). This poses a problem for direct realism, since what holds in the example of the distant star holds also (though far less dramatically) in more mundane cases, such as my claim to see the bureau across the room, in which the time lag or interval is much shorter. Provided there is a time lag, no matter how small, there is reason to say that *S* is always directly aware of something other than the physical object in question.”<sup>16</sup>

## 6.2 The Argument from the Scientific Image

The next time-honoured objection to GDR runs as follows: “If it is the material *world*, and not a more or less subjective representation of it, that we directly apprehend in perception, then what are we to say of the ways in which the scientific image of the world differs from the manifest image? Secondary qualities—colour, for instance—are not properties of mind-independent material objects. Thus, whatever has such properties (e.g. – is coloured) is not a material object. But what normal human perceivers see is in fact coloured. Hence, what I see is not a material object but a mental one, so that the objects of immediate (visual) perception are sense-data”<sup>17</sup>.

## 6.3 Some Caveats

Now, the point is most emphatically *not* that the foregoing arguments are knock-down refutations of direct realism. On the contrary, neither of these objections can be reckoned unproblematic, and more work would have to be done to present detailed and well-worked out versions of them. Nevertheless, since each presents a serious challenge to

the idea that perception puts us in direct cognitive contact with an extra-mental reality, it seems fair to say that we are not entitled to help ourselves to **(P4)** until we understand why these arguments go astray (if indeed they do). That, however, is a large subject, about which Searle unfortunately says virtually nothing.<sup>18</sup>

I shall bring my discussion of **(P4)** to a close with two very brief observations. First, a word to those tempted to defend Searle by pointing out that he regards direct realism as a default position [43, p. 10]. Recall that, by Searle's own admission, default positions can be given up in the face of “a convincing argument” [43, p. 9]. What the invocation of the Time Lag Argument and the Argument from the Scientific Image does, then, is effectively shift the burden of proof back to Searle.

Second, even if Searle can bear this burden by refuting these (and numerous other) objections to direct realism, note that ER would not thereby be vindicated unless premise **(P3)** is true. And yet that there is no good reason to think that premise is true—or so we have already argued in Section 4.

## 7 Conclusion: The Real World Regained?

It is time to take stock. The main moral to be drawn from our discussion is, I submit, that the Master Argument depends on two assumptions Searle has failed to justify. In the absence of some compelling defence of **(P3)** and **(P4)**, Searle's “real world”, far from having been regained, seems as remote, elusive, and epistemically inaccessible as ever. This conclusion will be found congenial by external realism's post-Kantian critics, who will no doubt remind us that knowledge must remain an unfathomable mystery until we acknowledge that empirical reality is shaped and

<sup>16</sup>On the Time Lag Argument, see [5, 8, 3, 22, 12, 15, 24].

<sup>17</sup>For a noteworthy presentation of the Argument from the Scientific Image, see [18].

<sup>18</sup>For an attempt to restore the default position, see Austin [4]—though, curiously, Austin says that he is “*not* [...]—and this is a point to be clear about from the beginning—going to maintain that we ought to be ‘realists’, to embrace, that is, the doctrine that we *do* perceive material things” [4, p. 3]. Cf. Putnam, who contends that “the objects of (normal “veridical”) perception are “external” things, and, more generally, aspects of “external” reality” [34, p. 10].

structured by the mind. Whether we should join them, and thus become anti-realists by default, is a question which deserves separate and sustained consideration. What we can say here, however, is that Searle's Master Argument, though unsuccessful, has the virtue of revealing the ways in which the issues of realism, perception, and skepticism fit together—as well as some of the ways in which they do not.

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