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The Realist and the Vulgar: Hume on the Objects of Perception

Abstract According to David Hume, the ‘vulgar’ and the ‘philosophical’ opinion constitute possible forms the *belief* in the continuous and distinct existence of bodies might take in the human mind [cf. *THN* 1.4.2]. It is commonly assumed among philosophers and Hume scholars that the vulgar opinion amounts to an approximate statement of what is nowadays known as a *direct realist* account of perception: accordingly, since Hume’s aim is to undermine the vulgar opinion, his critique tends to be read as a critique of Direct Realism. The goal of this piece is to make an initial case against this wide-spread assumption: specifically, I suggest that the vulgar opinion might be a position closer to Idealist Phenomenalism than to Direct Realism. As far as possible, I avoid discussing the philosophical opinion: for convenience, I shall assume that it corresponds to a representationalist account of perception – in particular, a Lockean version of Indirect Realism.

I divide the present task into four parts. First, I outline the ‘vulgar opinion’ and describe how it seems to fit with a direct realist account of perception and its objects. Secondly, I argue against the previous assimilation by offering three reasons to think that the view thus described by Hume suits better a phenomenalist account of visual perception. Thirdly, I contend that this phenomenalist reading earns further support from the fact that it makes better sense of the main argument used by Hume to undermine the vulgar opinion, namely, the *argument from illusion*. Finally, I briefly address a particular objection against my assimilation of the vulgar opinion with what seems to be a form of Berkeleyan Phenomenalism.

Keywords David Hume · Vulgar Opinion · Direct Realism · Phenomenalism · Argument from Illusion · George Berkeley

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