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ABSTRACT

The Veil of Perception

In the history of representationalism, there is a reversal in how representations are viewed: from something that enables us to perceive, thereby revealing the world, to something that cloaks or veils it, enclosing us “within the circle of our own ideas.” Representations, according to the latter view, do not merely distort our view of reality, but hide it from us completely. The threat of a “veil of perception” is often thought to constitute a decisive objection against representationalism, such that the only way to avoid scepticism is to abjure representations entirely and to understand perception instead in radically different terms. Historically, this objection has been used to motivate both idealism and naïve realism.

In this paper, I will not be concerned with the alleged sceptical consequences of the veil or the assumptions that are thought to lead to it (like the argument from illusion). I will focus instead on the thesis itself, which I take to have roughly the following form:

All we have direct awareness of [*perceive, apprehend, know*] are our representations [*impressions, experiences, appearances, sense-data, ideas*], and not the objects in the external world they seem to be from, of, or about.

It is standardly thought that this assumption and the notion of subjectivity it embodies are early modern inventions. But versions of the thesis can already be found in antiquity, and what interests me is precisely when and why it arises.

After an initial exploration of the metaphor of veils, which exercises such a powerful grip on us, I turn to the underlying model, tracing it backwards in time. We find a clear version in Plotinus and another in Sextus Empiricus, as criticisms of earlier philosophers — if Sextus is right, it is endorsed by the Cyrenaics in particular, but both Sextus and Plotinus seem to have the Stoics and Aristotle in mind as well. These are all misreadings, however: these earlier forms of representationalism are not guilty of the charge. So the question remains why later thinkers came to think so almost reflexively.

Main Readings (the main argument proceeds in reverse chronological order):

Plotinus 4.6

Sextus Empiricus *M.* 7.357–58 (cf. 353–54); *PH* 2.75 (cf. 72)

Cyrenaics: Sext. Emp. *M.* 7.191–92, 194; Plut. *Adv. Colot.* 1120CD; Anon. *In Tht.*

65.29–39; Cic. *Luc.* 76

Stoics: LS 39A, B

Aristotle *Mem.* 1