

Reid's First Principle #7

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1. Introduction

Central to Reid's philosophy is common sense and its defense; central to the latter are the First Principles he articulates. But Reid's presentation gives rise to various problems of interpretation – for instance, whether first principles are general or particular, whether they are principles of truth or of evidence, in what sense they can really be said to be 'self evident', in what sense they are things 'we all believe', and so on.¹ Another such concern, and the one to be addressed here, is just how to understand one of the First Principles of Contingent Truths (hereinafter, 'First Principles') and its relation to the rest. This is First Principle #7, which speaks to the 'non-fallaciousness' of "the natural faculties, by which we distinguish truth from error".

Reid himself says that there is something special about this principle: "if any truth can be said to be prior to all others in the order of nature", he writes, it is FP#7 (EIP 447b, 481)². According to one influential interpretation (Keith Lehrer's) FP#7 is special in that it is a 'meta-principle', a 'first first principle'; it serves to close 'the truth gap', providing assurance that our faculties are trustworthy, and our common sense beliefs true. According to Philip de Bary, however, FP#7 is really not special at all: while other FPs speak to the reliability of the senses, memory, and consciousness, FP#7 in fact speaks only to the trustworthiness of our judging and reasoning powers – it is simply one reliability principle among others.

Each of these interpretations faces *prima facie* difficulties: According to de Bary, Lehrer's interpretation invites a dilemma – first horn: FP#7 is redundant, because other FPs already speak to the reliability of our faculties; second horn: if such reliability principles leave a truth gap yet to be bridged, then *FP#7* does too, and so a *further* such principle (a meta-meta-principle) is required. On the other hand, de Bary's interpretation faces clear textual barriers, not least (but not only – see below) because, as just noted, Reid himself *says*, as Lehrer has it, that FP #7 enjoys a kind of priority over the others; in the end, de Bary's reading, as he admits, appears to force us to put down such claims as just "bad Reid".

But while each faces *prima facie* difficulties, both Lehrer and de Bary are each surely on to something: Lehrer is surely correct that there's something special about FP#7 – that it plays a special role in Reid's system and that there is *some* good sense in which Reid regards it as a 'first first principle'. On the other hand, it seems that de Bary is right: if other FPs already speak to the reliability of our faculties, and if we think that this still

¹ Discussions of these matters include Alston (1985), Lehrer (1989), Rysiew (2005), Sosa and Van Cleve (2001), Van Cleve (1999), and Wolterstorff (2001).

² References to Reid will be followed by indication of the relevant work – *An Inquiry into the Human Mind* (IHM), or *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (EIP) – followed by as well page numbers in both the Hamilton and the Brookes editions. (For the former, 'a' refers to the left-hand column, 'b' to the right-hand side.)

leaves some real question as to their veracity, then the addition of some further, *general* reliability principle shouldn't make that (supposed or perceived) problem go away. The trick is to retain these insights simultaneously. The key to doing so, I'll be suggesting, is to reject a widely-held belief about Reid's FPs – namely, that by the time we get to FP#7 in the Reid's enumeration, he has *already* claimed that various of our faculties are reliable. Other FPs that are typically taken to be reliability (or otherwise epistemological) principles are, I want to suggest, not epistemological³ at all, but metaphysical. Once we see that, just why and wherein FP #7 is special becomes clear: *it is* properly epistemological, and perfectly general; and its priority consists in the epistemic fact that it, and it alone, is taken for granted whenever we form any beliefs (arrive at any truths) at all. So too: once we see that FP#7 is (almost! – see ftnt. 21) the uniquely epistemological FP, any concern that its introduction invites a vicious regress goes away.

That, in outline, is the view I'll be offering here. Now for a slower, more careful approach, beginning with a clearer statement of just why FP#7 poses an interpretive puzzle to begin with.

2. The Puzzle of First Principle #7

Because we're concerned here with what exactly Reid's Principles say, and how they relate to each other, it will be handy to have them before us. Here, then, are Reid's twelve "First Principles of Contingent Truths"⁴ (EIP 441a-452a, 470-490):

1. *First*, then, I hold, as a first principle, the existence of everything of which I am conscious.
2. Another first principle, I think, is, *That the thoughts of which I am conscious, are the thoughts of a being which I call myself, my mind, my person.*
3. Another first principle I take to be — *That those things did really happen which I distinctly remember.*
4. Another first principle is, *Our own personal identity and continued existence, as far back as we remember anything distinctly.*
5. Another first principle is, *That those things do really exist which we distinctly perceive by our senses, and are what we perceive them to be.*

³ Following Van Cleve, we can distinguish between *epistemic* principles and *epistemological* ones: the former "specify[...] the conditions under which beliefs of various types are justified, rational, evident, or the like" (1999, p. 5); the latter have more broadly to do with matters epistemic. Cf. Alston, p. 437.

⁴ Note that these are first principles *of contingent truths* – i.e., they function as axioms upon which out thinking is based when inquire about contingent matters. While I myself think, and think Reid thinks, that the principles themselves are contingent (see especially, perhaps, EIP 442a, 468), as Van Cleve observes (1999, p. 21), that is a distinct issue.

6. Another first principle, I think, is, *That we have some degree of power over our actions, and the determinations of our will.*

7. Another first principle is — *That the natural faculties, by which we distinguish truth from error, are not fallacious.*

8. Another first principle relating to existence, is, *That there is life and intelligence in our fellow-men with whom we converse.*

9. Another first principle I take to be, *That certain features of the countenance, sounds of the voice, and gestures of the body, indicate certain thoughts and dispositions of mind.*

10. Another first principle appears to me to be — *That there is a certain regard due to human testimony in matters of fact, and even to human authority in matters of opinion.*

11. *There are many events depending upon the will of man, in which there is a self-evident probability, greater or less, according to circumstances.*

12. The last principle of contingent truths I mention is, *That, in the phaenomena of nature, what is to be, will probably be like to what has been in similar circumstances.*

Those are the principles. What is the puzzle? It begins with a certain understanding of the various FPs' content – just what it is they're telling us. Here is a standard reading, from James Van Cleve:

“Some of these principles are purely or primarily metaphysical; for example, Principle 2 tells us that thoughts require a thinker and Principle 6 tells us that we have some degree of power over our actions. But others are plainly intended to have epistemological significance, proclaiming the trustworthiness of consciousness (Principle 1), memory (Principle 3), perception (Principle 5), our faculties in general (Principle 7), our beliefs concerning the minds of others (Principles 8 and 9), testimony (Principle 10), and induction (Principle 12).” (1999, p. 3; cf. 2009, p. 297).

But wait! For consciousness, memory, and perception, for example, we *already have* principles “proclaiming” their trustworthiness.⁵ We have other natural faculties, to be sure, but conception and abstraction, for instance, while of fundamental importance, are not means by which we distinguish truth from error – they're not *themselves* aimed at the

⁵ “...consciousness, memory, and perception...[already] have individual ‘first principles of contingent truths’ which apply to them, numbers 1, 3, and 5 respectively” (de Bary 2002, p. 375). In the same vein, Alston refers to several of the FPs as “epistemological principles hav[ing] to do exclusively with reliability” (1985, p. 437), and says that FP #5, e.g., is “the the^{se} that sense-perception is reliable” (p. 443). So too, Lehrer refers to FPs 1, 3, and 5 as “tell[ing] us that perception, consciousness, memory are not fallacious” (Lehrer 1998, p. 23).

production of true beliefs. Perhaps we need a separate reliability principle for testimony, say.⁶ But clearly there's *some* kind of superfluity here. Given FPs 1, 3, and 5, it's not clear what FP#7 is adding, and *vice versa*. So why *is* 7 there at all? Just as puzzling as FP#7's inclusion itself is that fact that, while 7 seems simply to generalize over what other FPs already say, Reid says that it is, in fact, quite *special*. He writes:

“If any truth can be said to be prior to all others in the order of nature, this seems to have the best claim; because, in every instance of assent, whether upon intuitive, demonstrative, or probable evidence, the truth of our faculties is taken for granted, and is, as it were, one of the premises on which our assent is grounded.” (EIP 447b, 481)

Well, perhaps so. But then, in any instance of memory-based assent, the reliability of memory is taken for granted; in any instance of perception-based assent, *its* reliability is taken for granted; and so too for consciousness. In short, the use of *any* faculty presumes its reliability;⁷ and we already have reliability principles for the chief individual (truth-directed) faculties; so it seems that the only thing FP#7 is adding is generality. Which is just to say that, strictly speaking, FP#7 isn't really *so* special. And, after all, *how could* it be, really, if the FPs are *all* ‘first principles’ and all, as such, self-evident?

That, then, is the puzzle: why do we need FP#7, and why think it's special, given what the rest of the FPs already say?

3. Lehrer's Reading, and De Bary's Response

Keith Lehrer (1989, 1990) has provided one influential answer to this question; de Bary refers to it as “[t]he new orthodoxy” (2002, p. 65). On this view, FP#7 is a ‘meta-principle’, a ‘first first principle’. Other FPs already “tell us that perception, consciousness, memory are not fallacious” (Lehrer 1998, p. 23). *FP #7*, however, serves to close ‘the truth gap’: *it* provides assurance that our natural principles of belief are trustworthy:

“The principle tells us that first principles, in addition to producing conviction, provide us with information vouching for the truth of the conviction. We assent to the convictions produced by our faculties because we take the truthfulness of our faculties for granted” (1989, p. 162).

And that presumption – that the deliverance of our faculties are truthful – extends to FP#7 itself: besides vouching for the other FPs, FP#7 vouches for itself. “It loops around and supports itself. We might [call] it the looping principle” (1990, pp. 3-4).

⁶ A propensity to rely on testimony is certainly natural (‘the principle of credulity’; IHM 196b, 194), though it's not clear that it makes good sense to say that *testimony* is a natural faculty.

⁷ At least, insofar as such use involves assent to the faculty's deliverances, as it does in normal cases. (One can imagine, for instance, cases in which a faculty is known to be unreliable, but in a systematic enough way that one can nonetheless make good use of its deliverances without taking them at face value or forming the relevant beliefs.) Thanks to Todd Buras for this point.

Philip de Bary (2000, 2002⁸) has both criticized Lehrer's account, and proposed an alternative interpretation of FP#7. On the negative side, De Bary argues that Lehrer's interpretation invites a dilemma. Either

- (i) FP#7 is not necessary – #1, #3, #5 already speak to the reliability of the faculties; "...we have already been assured by principle 5 [for example] that the power of perception is not fallacious. What extra assurance do we get of the truth of this or any other faculty by being told, in a metaprinciple, that the faculties en bloc are not fallacious? If principles 1, 3, and 5 are good enough severally as foundations for knowledge, then some joint metaprinciple to back them up is redundant" (2000, p. 377);
- or
- (ii), there *is* "some backing-up work for a metaprinciple to do" (2000, p. 377). Why would that be? Perhaps because we read FPs 1, 3, and 5, as psychological generalizations of common sense beliefs – they tell us that "all healthy people form beliefs (early, irresistibly, immediately, etc.) in conformity with principles 1, 3, and 5." That is, we all *believe* ("early, irresistibly, immediately, etc.") that memory, consciousness, and perception are reliable. FP#7 is then seen as affording us the information that such common sense (reliability-)beliefs *are true*. But, by parity of reasoning, a *further* such principle, *beyond* #7, is required. For why not read *FP#7 itself* as just another psychological generalization? "It says, perhaps, that all healthy people have faculties which, taken together, lead them to *believe* (irresistibly, immediately etc.) that the truth gap is closed. But now we need a metametaprinciple to 'inform' us that the (universal, irresistible) belief that the truth gap is closed is a true belief, and so on, and on" (p. 377; emphasis added). What this regress argument shows, De Bary says, is that "the truth gap cannot be bridged unless we import at some stage an externalist assumption that it is in fact bridged. Faced with having to bite the externalist bullet sooner or later, it is surely more philosophically hygienic to do it sooner-which in Reid's case will be at the level of the 'first principles of contingent truths' themselves" (2000, pp. 377-78).

How then *should* we understand FP#7? Enter de Bary's positive proposal: Contrary to appearances, and in spite of what Reid himself says, FP#7 is really not special at all. While other FPs speak to the reliability of the senses, memory, and consciousness, FP#7 in fact speaks only to the trustworthiness of "our judging and reasoning powers". Aside, however, from the (supposed) fact that the contrary interpretation runs into the problems just sketched, why think that's true?

Key to de Bary's interpretation is the observation that 'judging' and 'reasoning' are, like memory, perception, and consciousness, natural powers of the mind – 'intellectual powers'. And, like memory (Essay III) and perception (Essay II), say, both judging (Essay VI) and reasoning (Essay VII) have separate essays devoted to them in *EIP*. (Consciousness does not, de Bary notes, but it is "plainly an *Intellectual Power*, or

⁸ De Bary's 2000 article appears, with very slight changes, as Section 5.3 in his 2002 book. Here, I cite de Bary's work using the pagination of the original paper.

‘faculty’, in its own right” (2000, p. 375).) But while the faculties of memory, consciousness, and perception “have individual [FPs] which apply to them; numbers 1, 3, and 5, respectively” (2000, p. 375), on *Lehrer’s* reading, judgment and reasoning do not. According to de Bary, however, *that* is precisely the function of FP#7 – to give these faculties their own individual (though shared) principle.

In addition to avoiding the problems he thinks go along with interpreting FP#7 as not being merely the judging-and-reasoning counterpart of principles 1, 3, and 5, de Bary thinks, his interpretation is supported by the fact that, in a manuscript, the first comma in FP#7 is not there. That is, in an earlier version, FP#7 reads: “*the natural faculties [no pause] by which we distinguish truth from error, are not fallacious*” (see 2000, p. 380, n. 22). *Sans* comma, it’s harder to take it as obvious that “the natural faculties” in FP#7 is meant to refer to *all* such faculties together.

Finally, de Bary points out that, in the 13 paragraphs of comments following the statement of FP#7, there are four spots at which Reid clearly refers, not to *all* the faculties, but to *judging* and *reasoning* specifically (see 2000, pp. 380-381). And each of these, de Bary writes, “puts beyond question the claim that Reid intends the principle to apply only to the faculties of judgment and reasoning” (2000, p. 380).

What, then, of passages where Reid makes it sound like FP#7 is special – most notably, that beginning “If any truth can be said to be prior to all others in the order of nature, this seems to have the best claim...”? On any reading, de Bary says, this passage is “embarrassing” and “simply ‘bad Reid’.”⁹ For, if FP#7 is a not a Metaprinciple, then what Reid says here “is flatly inconsistent with Reid’s implicit commitment to the parity of first principles. All first principles are equal in being, by definition, innate and unprovable; and they can all be identified only by certain ‘marks’ -- self-evidence, irresistibility, etc.” (2000, p. 382). Whereas, if FP#7 *is* a metaprinciple, that’s problematic as well:

“Dr. Reid should surely not, by his own lights, be claiming that the truth of the set of human faculties is ‘prior to all others in the order of nature.’ We should expect whatever truth occupies that cosmic ‘pole position’ to include a reference to God, nature’s Wise and Bountiful Author. And in any case, we can find a candidate with *at least* as good a claim to priority from among Reid’s purely secular list of twelve first principles, namely principle 12: ‘*That in the phaenomena of nature. What is to be, will probably be like to what has been in similar circumstances.*’” (2000, p. 382).

⁹ De Bary is not the only recent commentator who has found this particular passage difficult to reconcile with his/her own preferred reading of Reid’s epistemology – both van Cleve (2008, pp. 301-302) and Lemos (2004, Chapter 4) think that this passage marks a significant, and unexplained, mistake on Reid’s part. It’s clear that, in van Cleve’s case anyway, the interpretative problem stems from his wanting, like de Bary (and Greco 2002, 2010), to read Reid as an externalist – something that, I think, we have independent reason not to do (see Rysiew 2005, 2011, and fnnt. 23, below).

So, on either reading, de Bary thinks, this passage is problematic, indeed “embarrassing” (*ibid*). So everyone has reason to disregard it. And we have, in any case, independent reason to think that FP#7 *isn't* special – that it’s just a “run-off-the-mill ‘first principle of contingent truths’” (2000, pp. 382-3).

4. Against De Bary’s Reading

While de Bary’s reading is meant avoid the dilemma facing (he thinks) anyone who takes FP#7 to be ‘special’, attributing significant – not to mention, unexplained -- error is something to be avoided wherever possible. Quite apart from general considerations of charity, however, de Bary’s interpretation of FP#7 is problematic.

For instance, while ‘judging’ and ‘reasoning’ get mentioned numerous times in Reid’s comments of FP#7, perception, consciousness, and memory do so as well. In showing how FP#7 *is* something to which we normally, and automatically, give our implicit assent, Reid refers, for instance, to the credit a person ordinarily gives to “the testimony of his senses, his memory, or his reason” (EIP 448a, 482); and, in discussing Descartes’ treatment of the possibility that all of our judging and reasoning powers are fallacious, Reid refers to the sceptical possibility that “whatever evidence [a man] has from his consciousness, his senses, his memory, or his reason, yet possibly some malignant being had given him those faculties on purpose to impose upon him” (EIP 447b, 480-481). In short, while ‘judging’ and ‘reasoning’ are often referred to by Reid here, those references are intermingled with specific references to the faculties that it is supposed to be the business of FP’s 1, 3, and 5 to address.

And there is a straightforward explanation of why that might be, an explanation that raises a more fundamental problem for de Bary’s interpretation: namely, that while judgment and reason are *distinguishable* types of mental operation, while they can be analytically *isolated* in carrying out an anatomy of the mind, they are not *separate* from our other truth-oriented faculties. ‘Judgment’, Reid says, refers to “every determination of the mind concerning what is true or what is false” (EIP 415b, 411) – any kind of “mental affirmation or negation” (EIP 414b, 409). And such judgments are the normal attendants of various acts of consciousness, memory, and perception.¹⁰ Such judgments are, to be sure, quick and automatic, but they are judgments nonetheless. Reid variously refers to them as ‘natural judgments’ and ‘judgments of nature’ (e.g., IHM 209a, 215), and he is explicit in wishing to regard consciousness, memory and the senses as “judging

¹⁰ “In persons come to years of understanding, judgment necessarily accompanies all sensation, perception by the senses, consciousness, and memory” (EIP 414a-b, 409). “The man who perceives an object, believes that it exists, and is what he distinctly perceives it to be; nor is it in his power to avoid such judgment. And the like may be said of memory, and of consciousness. Whether judgment ought to be called a necessary concomitant of these operations, or rather a part or ingredient of them, I do not dispute; but it is certain that all of them are accompanied with a determination that something is true or false” (EIP 414b, 409).

faculties” (EIP 415a, 410).¹¹ And so too, it seems, must anyone: for it is only because they involve judgment that these faculties are in the business of helping us to ‘distinguish truth from error’.¹²

In addition to raising a problem for his interpretation of FP#7 *per se*, the fact that other truth-directed faculties already include judgment makes de Bary vulnerable to the same style of argument he uses against Lehrer: Given that the faculties de Bary sees as being targeted by FPs 1, 3, and 5 already involve judgment, if de Bary wishes to see *it* (judgment) as among the real subjects of FP#7, his interpretation will face a dilemma: the reference to judgment in FP#7 is either redundant, or it’s doing some real work; if the former, it should be dropped; if the latter, we need to know just what extra work it’s doing, and why the explicit mention of judgment in FP#7 doesn’t leave something wanting as well.

As to reason, Reid writes:

“We ascribe to reason two offices, or two degrees. The first is to judge of things self-evident; the second to draw conclusions that are not self-evident from those that are. The first of these is the province, and the sole province, of common sense....” (EIP 425b, 433;)

So, it is reason, in the form of common sense, that *issues in* the natural judgments attending normal exercise of memory, consciousness, and perception. To be sure, unlike judging, reasoning – the other ‘office’ of reason, and the other faculty that de Bary thinks FP#7 singles out – is no part of the exercise of perception, consciousness, and memory; it couldn’t be, since Reid is adamant that they produce judgments *immediately*. And reasoning does not already have a FP of its own. So, on anyone’s view, FP#7 will have *some* element of non-superfluity to it – it at least gives reasoning the place it surely deserves among the FPs. The evidence before us, however, makes it hard to take seriously the idea that FP#7 is meant to refer *merely* to ratiocination.

Summing up this brief discussion: the textual case for reading FP#7 as referring *only* to judging and reason is difficult to make – quite apart from any weight being placed on the first comma in Reid’s statement of the principle, and quite apart from any problems (e.g., a regress) to which such an interpretation might give rise.

What about de Bary’s argument that, *just considered all on its own*, the passage in which Reid makes it sound like FP#7 is special is problematic? As we saw just above, de Bary claims that if FP#7 is supposed to be a metaprinciple, it’s an incongruous choice for Reid to make. Again he writes:

¹¹ This passage is hardly idiosyncratic. At (EIP 329a-b, 231-232), e.g., Reid speaks of ‘seeing’ as itself doing the judging, producing various convictions, and so on; and he says similar things about consciousness and memory as well – they produce immediate belief, etc.

¹² Given, then, that he wants to see FPs 1, 3, and 5 as already asserting the *reliability* of consciousness, memory and perception, de Bary cannot claim that, while judgment typically *follows* instances of these acts of mind, it should not be considered a *part* of them. For it is only insofar as consciousness, memory and perception incorporate judgment that they *can* be fallacious/non-fallacious, reliable or not.

“Dr. Reid should surely not, by his own lights, be claiming that the truth of the set of human faculties is ‘prior to all others in the order of nature.’ We should expect whatever truth occupies that cosmic ‘pole position’ to include a reference to God, nature’s Wise and Bountiful Author. And in any case, we can find a candidate with *at least* as good a claim to priority from among Reid’s purely secular list of twelve first principles, namely principle 12: ‘*That in the phaenomena of nature. What is to be, will probably be like to what has been in similar circumstances.*’” (2000, p. 382).

However, the case for FP#7 over anything specifically theistic is clearly stated by Reid: “[T]he unjust *live by faith*, as well as the *just*” (IHM 95b, 4). As Wolterstorff says, “accepting God’s goodness as a reason for trusting in one’s faculties presupposes, if nothing else, one’s faculty of reason” (2001, p. 212).¹³ So too: any reference to God as nature’s wise and bountiful author would take for granted what’s stated in FP#7 as well. And the same goes for de Bary’s claim that, among purely secular principles, the inductive principle has *at least* as good a claim to occupying the “cosmic ‘pole position’”: our implicit commitment to *that* principle, indeed to *anything*, appears also to presume FP#7.

In this way, we’re naturally led back to the thought that FP#7 *is* special, and in much the way that Reid (and, following him, Lehrer) appears to think. But that, as we saw, is supposed to be problematic. What to do?

5. Why FP#7 is Special After all

The key at this point is to back up and examine a widely-held assumption about the FPs that precede FP#7 – namely, that by the time we get to FP#7 in the Reid’s enumeration, he has *already* claimed that various of our faculties are reliable; specifically, that he has already claimed (with principles 1, 3, and 5) that consciousness, memory, and perception are reliable. It is only because this has been assumed that we’ve been led to grapple with the interpretive puzzle we’ve been considering. Thus: since these other faculties already have first principles asserting their reliability, there appears to be no further epistemological work for FP#7 to do,¹⁴ so FP#7 is superfluous; or, there *is* extra work it’s supposed to be doing, but we must then ask why the motivation for FP#7 doesn’t lead to a regress; or, finally, in spite of appearances, and the problems facing such an interpretation, we limit the scope of FP#7 – it is just another reliability principle, alongside 1, 3, and 5, applying only to judging and reasoning.

But what else might FPs 1, 3, and 5 be asserting, if not the reliability of consciousness, memory, and perception? They are, I suggest, merely metaphysical; more specifically,

¹³ Cf. Lehrer and Warner (2000), pp. 367-72. And: “*Every* kind of reasoning for the veracity of our faculties, amounts to no more than taking their own testimony for their veracity” (EIP 447b, 481; emphasis added).

¹⁴ Apart, perhaps, from giving some place to reasoning among the FPs – see above. But, as discussed, it’s implausible that that’s *all* FP#7 is meant to do.

these other FPs “relat[e] to existence”; they tell me that the various acts of the mind of which I am conscious (FP#1), the past events I distinctly remember (FP#3), and the things that I distinctly perceive (FP#5) around me, *do really exist* or *did really happen*.¹⁵ Or, insofar as we’re taking them to (at least) state our most deeply held commitments, these principles are meant to capture the fact that the reality of these things is something that all normal humans (irresistibly, naturally, etc.) believe or take for granted.

Of course, in the statement of these principles, mention is made of the faculties (consciousness, memory, perception) that acquaint us with the relevant sorts of objects and events. But it does not follow that the principles are intended to be *about* those faculties. On the present interpretation, with 1, 3, and 5, Reid is expressing our natural (irresistible, etc.) belief in, or commitment to, the existence of various sorts of things. Which things?¹⁶ Reid answers with (plural) definite descriptions – ‘the sorts of things we are conscious of’, ‘the sorts of things we distinctly perceive and remember’. In this way, the mentioning of the faculties in question is merely a referential device, directing our attention to the relevant classes of things, the firm (etc.) belief in the existence of which is really what’s at issue.

Further, *qua* definite descriptions, ‘the things we distinctly perceive’, ‘the things we distinctly remember’, and ‘the things of which we are conscious’ are being used referentially, rather than attributively (Donnellan 1966). To explain: *if* we take FP#5, e.g., as an epistemological principle asserting the reliability of perception, it is important not to give “perception” a ‘success’ reading, since that would trivialize the principle (Sosa and Van Cleve 2001, p. 188; cf. Lehrer 1998, p. 22 and Wolterstorff 2001, p. 224). In the same way, on the present interpretation, FP#5 (e.g.) should not be read as stating, *There are things that we distinctly perceive, and they exist* – that would be trivial too. Rather, on the present view, the content of the descriptive phrases is inessential to what’s being expressed; the relevant FPs have the force of, ‘Such things as *those* [‘pointing’, to some ostensible object of perception, memory, or consciousness] exist’. What’s important to Reid is to assert, or express the belief in, the existence of certain types of object. That we distinctly perceive them, for instance, is inessential to that claim. Again, the reference to the relevant faculty merely points our attention in the right direction.¹⁷

¹⁵ There is controversy over how best to characterize such commitments – whether it is appropriate to describe them (as Reid sometimes does) as beliefs, as opposed to saying (as Reid also does) that they are things all normal humans commonly take for granted. (For discussion of this issue, see Wolterstorff 2001, pp. 215-227, and Sosa and Van Cleve 2001, pp. 190-193.) Here, I move between these two ways of putting the relevant point; the present discussion is meant to be neutral on the question of which, if either, is to be preferred.

¹⁶ Here, I’m indebted to Todd Buras.

¹⁷ As does ‘The man drinking the martini’ in its referential use. In terms of that well-known example, if it turns out that the person to whom the speaker is referring has some other colorless liquid in their glass, the use of the phrase need not be defective, since the referential use doesn’t presuppose the existence of a unique object satisfying the description -- it’s just serving to pick out the person about whom the speaker has something to say. (Donnellan’s paper has of course spawned much debate as to whether the distinction in question is semantic or pragmatic, and so on, but there is broad agreement that the general phenomenon is real. Needless to say, nothing in the present paper hangs on such questions; the reference to Donnellan is meant merely to help

One source of support for reading 1, 3, and 5 in the manner I've been recommending is provided by FP#8 – more specifically, by how Reid prefaces its statement:

8. Another first principle **relating to existence**, is, *That there is life and intelligence in our fellow-men with whom we converse.* (Bold added.)

Obviously, Reid is not referring to FP#7 here – *it* doesn't 'relate to existence'; it's clearly epistemological; no one denies that. *Perhaps* Reid means to be referring merely to FP#6,

6. Another first principle, I think, is, *That we have some degree of power over our actions, and the determinations of our will.*

But why stop there? Strictly speaking, while clearly metaphysical, FP#6 doesn't mention existence. But, if we look at FPs 1-5, most of them do.¹⁸ In fact, if we are not already assuming that 1, 3, and 5 are intended as epistemological, rather than metaphysical, it's not difficult to see them as being concerned *merely* with existence:

1. *First*, then, I hold, as a first principle, the existence of everything of which I am conscious.

2. Another first principle, I think, is, *That the thoughts of which I am conscious, are the thoughts of a being which I call myself, my mind, my person.*

3. Another first principle I take to be — *That those things did really happen which I distinctly remember.*

4. Another first principle is, *Our own personal identity and continued existence, as far back as we remember anything distinctly.*

5. Another first principle is, *That those things do really exist which we distinctly perceive by our senses, and are what we perceive them to be.*

Granted, if they're true, 1, 3, and 5, certainly have epistemological *implications*: if *those things do really exist which we distinctly perceive by our senses, and are what we perceive them to be*, then perception is reliable, for instance. In the same way, if it's true that, *in the phænomena of nature, what is to be, will probably be like to what has been in similar circumstances*, then induction is reliable. But FP#12 doesn't *assert* that, or indeed anything about any of our faculties or inferential practices. FP#12, rather, serves to mark the fact that *the uniformity of nature* – that metaphysical proposition -- is among our natural, immediate, and fundamental commitments. So too: FP#8, if true, has the

clarify what's being claimed about the relevant FPs. Thanks to Mike Raven for discussion on these matters.)

¹⁸ FPs 1, 4, and 5 do so explicitly; the *pastness* of the *events* in FP#3 mandates "did really happen" (vs. *do really exist*); and, as Reid's discussion of Hume's views in connection with FP #2 (EIP 444a-b, 473-474) makes clear, it is as much concerned with the reality (hence, the existence) of the self (mind, person) as with its being the subject of one's thoughts.

consequence that our beliefs about other minds are reliable; FPs 2 and 4, that my beliefs about my existence and continued identity are; and so on. But it doesn't follow that FPs 8, 2, and 4 are *themselves* epistemological.

So too, I want to suggest, with respect to FPs 1, 3, and 5: they may well have epistemological implications, but those implications are external to the principles themselves.¹⁹ Nor do I think this interpretation is any kind of a stretch. After all: that the various things I (distinctly) see really exist, for example, and that perception is reliable, are clearly different beliefs – one concerns the world, the other concerns me and my faculties.²⁰ And, if we look at what Reid says in elaborating and commenting upon each of 1, 3, and 5, it becomes clear that it is really the former type of beliefs – beliefs about what *exists* – that he is concerned with there.

For instance, in connection with FP#1, Reid writes:

“When a man is conscious of pain, he is certain of its existence; when he is conscious that he doubts or believes, he is certain of the existence of those operations.

But the irresistible conviction he has of the reality of those operations is not the effect of reasoning; it is immediate and intuitive. The existence therefore of those passions and operations of our minds, of which we are conscious, is a first principle, which nature requires us to believe upon her authority.” (EIP 442b, 470)

Having stated FP#3, Reid refers back to what he has just said about consciousness: “the testimony of memory, like that of consciousness, is immediate; it claims our assent upon its own authority” (EIP 445b, 474). What is it that memory testifies to? The reality of various past things and events. It's *that* belief, Reid goes on to say, that Hume labors unsuccessfully to account for in terms of the vivacity of certain perceptions – as Hume shows, “this vivacity gives no ground to believe the existence of external objects. And it is obvious that it can give as little ground to believe the past existence of the objects of memory” (EIP 445a, 475).

¹⁹ Todd Buras has suggested to me that there may be a relevant and important difference between FP#12, say, and FPs 1, 3, and 5: while the former might have epistemological implications, those can be derived only by addition of some further premise (that the assumption nature's uniformity is essential to inductive reasoning, say); whereas, it seems that the connection is much tighter in the case of the latter. E.g., if the things we distinctly remember did really happen, then the beliefs formed as a result of distinct memories are reliable. Essentially, it's just a rewording of the principle that's required to generate the epistemological moral. To reply: I am not sure that the example just given is merely a case of rewording what's already been stated. (See below, this paragraph. See too what was suggested above about the function of such phrases as ‘the things we distinctly remember’, etc., in 1, 3, and 5.) But even if it were, rewordings can of course make for significant semantic differences.

²⁰ Of course, when I assent to the former proposition, I thereby presume the latter. But this doesn't show that the two are not really distinct. What it illustrates, as Reid sees it, is the special role of FP#7 among the FPs. -- See below.

And so too for FP#5, *That those things do really exist which we distinctly perceive by our senses, and are what we perceive them to be*: what “all men are led to give implicit faith to” is “the testimony of their senses” – viz., the existence of “certain [objects and] beings about us” (EIP 445b, 476-477). Here too, there is no reason to take the principle itself as epistemological.

Of course, in his comments following the statements of FPs 1, 3, and 5, the discussion does sometimes turn epistemological, with Reid mentioning some arguments for thinking various faculties might be fallacious, and so on. But this is no problem for the present view. In general, *any* kind of critical consideration of *any* claim or belief is bound to quickly turn epistemological, even where the claim/belief in question is clearly non-epistemological. Second, and relatedly: insofar as issues concerning the fallaciousness or not of various faculties do creep into the discussion of other FPs is to be expected, given the unique status that FP#7 has among the FPs. (On which, more below.)

Aside from being perfectly consonant with what Reid himself says, taking FPs 1, 3, and 5 to “relat[e] to existence”, rather than to matters epistemological, has the consequence that the *role* of FP#7, the *need* for it, now becomes perfectly clear: *it* is epistemological; *it* concerns, not the existence of various types of things and events, or other metaphysical matters, but the faculties – all of them -- by which we gain knowledge of these and any other facts about the world.²¹ FP#7, then, is not meant to plug an apparent gap in the epistemological assurance provided by principles 1, 3, and 5; for, on the present reading, these principles are not meant to provide any such assurance at all. Thus, the question of whether *FP#7* fills the gap that these other epistemological principles leave open, or whether some *still further* epistemological principle is required, does not arise.

So too, there is now a straightforward explanation of the *specialness* of FP#7: its ‘priority’ or ‘specialness’ consists in the fact that, just as Reid says, unique among the FPs, *it* is taken for granted whenever one forms any beliefs at all, including any beliefs in any of the other FPs. It is in this sense that FP#7 is a ‘first first principle’, as Lehrer puts it: it is, so to speak, the implicit commitment behind all others.²²

Is FP#7 a ‘looping principle’, to use another of Lehrer’s phrases? That FP#7 is true is itself a deliverance of our faculties, and if the latter are not fallacious, as FP#7 says they are not, then FP#7 itself is trustworthy as well. In this way, in vouching for the deliverances of our faculties generally, FP#7 “vouches for itself” (Lehrer 1990, pp. 42-3).

²¹ FP#10 -- *That there is a certain regard due to human testimony in matters of fact, and even to human authority in matters of opinion* – is like this as well; it is the inter-personal, social-epistemological counterpart of FP#7.

²² Reid says: the “fundamental truth on which all others rest” (EIP 448a, 481). This is an unfortunate way of putting the point: it not that all *truths* rest upon the non-fallaciousness of our faculties. Nor is it that Reid thinks that FP#7 serves as a *premise* for other beliefs, except in some figurative sense – “[it] is, *as it were*, one of the premises on which our assent is grounded” (EIP 447b, 481; emphasis added; see Lehrer 1989, esp. p. 163). The better, non-figurative way of putting the point, again, is to say that FP#7 is, inevitably, taken for granted whenever one assents to anything at all.

However, while FP#7 in this way reflexively ‘vouches for itself’, it does not follow that *that* (FP#7’s reflexive character) is what justifies the principle. In a well-known passage, Reid addresses the question of the grounds²³ we have for FP#7:

“How then come we to be assured of this fundamental truth on which all others rest [viz., FP#7; see my ftnt. 22]? Perhaps evidence, as in many other respects it resembles light, so in this also -- that, as light, which is the discoverer of all visible objects, discovers itself at the same time, so evidence, which is the voucher for all truth, vouches for itself at the same time.” (EIP 448a, 481)

This evocative and crucial claim about evidence is quite general, and it bears upon the other FPs, which of course have evidence attending them too. Thus, for example, it is not *merely* that I find myself naturally, irresistibly, automatically, believing that those things which I distinctly perceive exist, as I might find myself simply ‘stuck with’ some other belief (e.g., that I’m going to win the lottery). Rather, the relevant principle (here, FP#5) is (Reid thinks) *evident*, and its evidentness is itself evident. Moreover, its evidentness is not owing to anything else. If it were, the principle would not be self-evident. And while, for the reasons given above, there is a perfectly good sense in which FP#7 is the ‘first first’ principle, each of the FPs is of course self-evident, according to Reid.^{24, 25}

A final point brings us back to the question of FP#7’s specialness. As we’ve just seen, the evidentness of evidence – the fact that, like light, evidence discloses itself as it discloses other things – is involved in our consideration of and assent to each of the FPs, and not just FP#7. But if it is the reflexive character of *evidence* that assures us of FP#7, then it is not the looping (reflexive) character of *FP#7* – the quasi-formal fact that, *qua* deliverance of our intellectual faculties, it implies its own non-fallaciousness – which does so. In the same way, on the present account it is not the distinctive looping (reflexive) character of *FP#7 per se* that accounts for its specialness. FP#7’s specialness, rather, derives from its perfectly general and distinctively epistemological character, because of which it has the kind of ‘priority’ that Reid describes.

6. Conclusion

²³ Here, as elsewhere, ‘ground’ might be intended as either a descriptive-psychological or a normative-epistemic term. Reid tends to mean both of these, when speaking of evidence as ‘the ground of belief’ (EIP 328a, 228), and I think it’s both of these questions that he’s meaning to address in the passage at (EIP 448a, 481). In my 2005 and 2011, I explore this and other ideas central to Reid’s thinking about evidence. As the present discussion suggests, among the consequences of that thinking is that Reid’s epistemological views are not purely externalist.

²⁴ Nothing in the present interpretation is “inconsistent with Reid’s implicit commitment to the parity of first principles. All first principles are equal in being, by definition, innate and unprovable; and they can all be identified only by certain ‘marks’ -- self-evidence, irresistibility, etc.” (de Bary 2000, p. 382).

²⁵ Some commentators have found it hard to take seriously the idea that the first principles are really self-evident. Elsewhere (see ftnt. 23), I address such concerns. The more general question as to the nature and normative status of the FPs is a large and difficult one; I set out my own views on this in (Rysiew 2002).

The First Principles are central to Reid's epistemological views; and, by Reid's own account, FP#7 occupies a special place among them. The discussion here has been meant to show how that can be so, given the rest of the FPs, and given the problems that de Bary has argued face any attempt to regard FP#7 as having some kind of priority. The key, I've suggested, is to let go of the idea that certain FPs preceding FP#7 already assert the better part of what FP#7 explicitly states. Once that's done, the need for FP#7 is clear: it is needed because there is nothing epistemological in the FPs that precede it. So too, far from being "embarrassing" or "simply 'bad Reid'" (de Bary 2000, p. 382), that FP#7 has a special place among the FPs is a straightforward consequence of its being both perfectly general and distinctively epistemological.²⁶

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²⁶ For helpful comments and discussion, I'm indebted to Todd Buras, Alastair Crosby, Laurent Jaffro, Mike Raven, and the other attendants at the Vermont Reid conference.

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