

REID'S [MIS]CHARACTERISATION OF JUDGMENT

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Relatively early on in his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Reid writes: "Not only in most of our intellectual operations, but in many active principles of the human mind, belief enters as an ingredient".¹ Thus, belief in Reid's view is an ingredient not only in consciousness, perception and remembrance, but also in joy, sorrow, gratitude, pity, and so on. Indeed, Reid claims, belief is an ingredient "in any action that is done for an end" [327b]. And it is in light of, as he sees it, the ubiquity of belief that Reid says that "belief in general is the main spring in the life of man" [328a].

In Chapter I., Essay VI, of the same work, however, Reid's concern — one could say — is to point up the ubiquity of *judgment*. There, he writes that, in addition to judgment's accompanying "all sensation, perception by the senses, consciousness and memory", [414b]:

some exercise of judgment is necessary in the formation of all abstract and general conceptions, whether more simple or more complex; in dividing, in defining, and, in general, in forming all, clear and distinct conceptions of things, which are the only fit materials of reasoning [416a].

Indeed, it is Reid's view that it is only by virtue of our possessing the faculty² of judgment that we come by the very conception of judgment:

There are notions or ideas that ought to be referred to the faculty of judgment as their source; because, if we had not that faculty, they could not enter into our minds; and to those that have that faculty, and are capable of reflecting upon its operations, they are obvious and familiar.

Among these we may reckon the notion of judgment itself; the notions of a proposition — of its subject, predicate, and copula; of affirmation and negation, of true and false; of knowledge, belief, disbelief, opinion, assent, evidence. From no source could we acquire these notions, but from reflecting upon our judgments [414a].

Now it is, of course, precisely because Reid sees conception as presupposing judgment that he encounters a seeming paradox; for he also maintains that judgment presupposes conception. This paradox, however, and Reid's (attempted) resolution of it, are not themselves what I wish to focus on here. My concern, rather, is with Reid's characterisation of that in which judgment (the operation³) consists; for I think that Reid, in fact, *mischaracterises* judgment. Indeed, I think

that what Reid himself says in defending his views against the charge that they engender a paradox makes it clear that what *he himself* takes to be the distinctive nature of judgment does not square with his 'official' position concerning the nature of judgment. Rather than setting out to try to establish this result directly, I want to begin by trying to motivate the thought that, even taken on its own, Reid's 'official' characterisation of judgment is unsatisfactory.

Just what is the view that I've been calling "Reid's 'official' position concerning the nature of judgment"? The answer to this question is suggested by the remark of Reid's (at [414a]) quoted just previously. Judgment, in Reid's (official) view, is a kind of "mental affirmation or denial" [413a]. He writes:

[I]t is evident that a man who feels pain judges and believes that he is really pained. 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 . . . [Judgment] is a mental affirmation or negation; it may be expressed by a proposition affirmative or negative, and it is accompanied with the firmest belief [414b].⁴

Now, I have already claimed that we have reason to be uncomfortable with this characterisation of judgment. And here is why: as Reid notes, there is an obvious affinity between that "inward tribunal of the mind" that is judgment (as characterized above) and an actual tribunal of justice — "it is probable," Reid writes, "that the word *judgment*, as well as many other words we use in speaking of this operation of the mind, are grounded on this analogy" [413a].

Consulting the entries under "judge" and "judgment" in *The Oxford English Dictionary* does, in fact, confirm Reid's etymological speculation on this point. As Reid himself is concerned elsewhere to make clear, however, reasoning based upon (a purported) analogy, while perhaps useful or even indispensable, can lead the philosopher into error:

In vain should we attempt to avoid this analogical language, for we have no other language upon the subject; yet it is dangerous, and apt to mislead. All analogical and figurative words have a double meaning; and, if we are not very much upon our guard, we slide insensibly from the borrowed and figurative meaning into the primitive. We are prone to carry the parallel between the things compared farther than it will hold, and thus very naturally to fall into error [362b; cf., also, 236b-238a].

What error do I think Reid might be falling into in speaking of judgment as he does? Crudely stated, my worry is this: we have seen that Reid wishes us to understand judgment, the “inward tribunal of the mind”, as involving mental assent (affirmation) or dissent (denial) — “which indeed is only another name for judgment” [413a]. The trouble with this, however, is that the most plausible and natural understanding of assent (for example) is one according to which it involves *the expression of agreement*.⁵

But *how*, exactly, does one express such an agreement? In an actual court of law, this is done (by the judge) in whatever happens to be his native tongue — *that* serves as the medium of his expressing his verdict; and that medium, as it happens, is representational in character. Similarly, then, one might be led naturally to suppose that, since assent is just the expression of agreement, *some medium* of expression is required; and surely an adequate medium of expression is going to be representational in character. The trouble is, however, that Reid is very much an *anti-representationalist*. So how would he have us understand just how it is that we can carry on the activity of judging, given that judging is understood as a kind of mental affirmation/denial?

But there is a further, and perhaps even more elementary, problem with the view that it is basic to the idea of judgment that it consists in mental affirmation or denial. For one who adheres to such a view is in the embarrassing position of having to answer the following question: how we are to explain *why* a person would mentally affirm (or deny) something, if not because they have an antecedent *belief* that it is true (or false)? And if the person in question *has* such an antecedent belief (whether this be affirmative or negative), how is any judgment they subsequently arrive at not simply superfluous? What work could *it* be doing — in, e.g., helping us to arrive at “abstract and general conceptions” [416a] — that could not be done by the belief which gives rise to that judgment? I prefaced my discussion of Reid’s claim of the ubiquity of judgment by mentioning his argument for the ubiquity of belief. But mightn’t it be that it is belief, and belief alone, which is the “main spring in the life of man” [328a]?

Yet perhaps the preceding argument rests upon a misunderstanding of the nature of Reid’s characterisation of judgment as involving mental affirmation or denial. What do I mean by this? Well, the argument of the last several paragraphs assumes that this characterisation is supposed to help *explain* the phenomenon of judgment. Whereas, it is plausible — indeed, desirable, insofar as one takes the preceding argument to have some bite — to suppose that Reid’s characterisation of judgment is meant to have the same force as his talk (in the *Inquiries*) of how a sensation ‘*suggests*’ an external thing: that is, it is meant to express a certain *fact* about our psychology and about the phenomenology of this corner of our mental lives.⁶

To repeat, this is how I am, at present, inclined to interpret the intended nature and force of (what I have been calling) Reid’s ‘official’ characterisation of judgment. And (as I suggested parenthetically, above) just how attractive one finds this interpretation will depend upon how convincing one finds the argument

that, if taken to be explanatory, this characterisation pushes Reid towards both some form of representationalism and an admission that it's *belief*, rather than judgment, which is *the* ubiquitous mental phenomenon.

Granted, at least in its first part, the argument in question rested upon assuming that assent/dissent is to be understood as *the expression* of agreement/disagreement. But, one wonders, if 'assent/dissent' are supposed to have *explanatory* force, what other construal might they be given? And, in the absence of a satisfactory answer to this last question, one might well want to ask how Reid's characterisation of judgment is not an hypothesis (in the derogatory, Newtonian sense of that term [see 234a-236b]). So there really is pressure, I think, to opt for what I, at any rate, regard as the more plausible interpretation of the intended nature and force of the 'official' Reidian characterisation of judgment — according to which, once again, it is meant (not to explain but) to capture a certain fact about our psychology "which every one may be conscious of" [131b]: viz., that it is a distinctive feature of judgment that it involves a kind of mental affirmation/denial.

But even supposing that this interpretation of the intended force of Reid's characterisation of judgment is correct, the question immediately arises as to whether this characterisation captures what is distinctive about judgment. I do not think that it does. For I think that belief, just as much as judgment, involves a kind of mental affirmation/denial. I do not have any compelling *argument* for this claim; but I think that argument on this point would be out of place — I want simply to maintain that this commonality between judgment and belief is something "which every one may be conscious of" [131b]. Supposing I'm right about this, however, wherein might lie the distinctiveness of the mental operation of judgment (as opposed to belief)? Well, as I noted at the outset, I think that what Reid himself says in answering the charge of paradox suggests an answer to this question.

The alleged paradox, once again, derives from Reid's wanting to maintain both that conception presupposes judgment and that judgment presupposes conception. Reid's resolution of the seeming tension between these claims rests upon his drawing a contrast between distinct and indistinct conceptions — it is only the former, Reid avers, which presupposes judgment:

We first obtain an original set of primitive conceptions from our faculties. These conceptions are, however, indistinct and inexact. By means of judgement, they are replaced by distinct and exact conceptions. Thus, our faculties provide us with a set of starter conceptions which give way to more scientific conceptions by the exercise of the faculty of judgement.⁷

But how, exactly, are these more distinct and exact conceptions arrived at by judgment? Reid writes that a mature cogniser's perception of a cube of brass, for example, is to be understood as follows:

First, From the one complex object which his senses presented, though one of the most simple the senses can present, he *educes* many simple and distinct notions of right lines, angles, plain surface, solid, equality, parallelism *Secondly*, When he *considers the cube as* compounded of these elements, put together in a certain order, he has then, and not before, a distinct and scientific notion of a cube. [418b; second and fourth emphases added]

I've emphasised the phrases "educes" and "considers . . . as . . ." by way of pointing up how what Reid himself says about the nature of judgment suggests that its distinctive character derives, not so much from its involving mental assent/dissent, but from such assent/dissent's issuing from an activity that is essentially *reflective*. That this really is Reid's view of the matter is further confirmed by the following passage, in which he is speaking of the conceptions of consciousness:

Consciousness, being a kind of internal sense, can no more give us distinct and accurate notions of the operations of our minds, than the external senses can give of external objects. Reflection upon the operations of our minds is the same kind of operation with that by which we form distinct notions of external objects. They differ not in their nature, but in this only, that one is employed about external, and the other about internal objects; and both may, with equal propriety, be called reflection Reflection upon anything, whether external or internal, makes it an object of our intellectual powers, by which we survey it on all sides, and form such judgments about it as appear to be just and true [420a-b].

It is precisely *this* feature of the mental operation termed 'judgment' — its involving our actively reflecting upon a certain matter, and surveying it on all sides — I conjecture, which underlies the analogy between this "inward tribunal of the mind" [413b] and a tribunal of justice, in which a judge weighs the evidence on both sides, listens to the testimony of a host of witnesses, and forms a verdict as to what "appear[s] to be just and true" [420b]. Granted, each of these 'tribunals' — the inward, and that of justice — has as its output a particular assenting/dissenting opinion. But what entitles them both to the name of 'judgment', rather than simply 'belief', is that this assent/dissent is arrived at via a process (or act) of reflection and deliberation. *That*, to repeat, is what I take to be the distinctive character of judgment.

By no means do I take myself to have provided a decisive proof of Reid's adhering to a conception of judgment which, in fact, belies his 'official' characterisation thereof. And, given that I want to maintain that it is the deliberative/reflective character of judgment, rather than its involving mental assent/dissent, which is its most fundamental characteristic, I need to explain why Reid thinks it proper to speak of the basic deliverances of common-sense as being *judgments*

[416aff.]. For, after all, the irresistibility of these last seem *not* to leave room for the sort of reflection and deliberation which, I've claimed, is characteristic of judgment. So don't I have to say that the basic beliefs of common sense are simply that — beliefs, and not (*contra* Reid) judgments?

I don't think so. It seems to me that we can justify the appellation "judgments" with regard to these beliefs because that title has a normative/approbativ force which is precisely what the phenomenon in question calls for, but which is entirely lacking when it comes to the term "beliefs". (Recall, in this context, Reid's remarking: "A man of sense is a man of judgment. Good sense is good judgment. Nonsense is what is evidently contrary to right judgment. Common sense is that degree of judgment which is common to men with whom we can converse and conduct business" [421b]). Moreover, one ought to bear in mind the fact that, as Reid says of those beliefs which we have "by the constitution of our nature", they "may, in the strictest sense, be called *judgments of nature*" [416a]. Which is just to say that, insofar as they are the issue of some sort of deliberative/reflective activity, that activity is carried out, not by this or that human cogniser, but by the very constitution with which we are all, *qua* humans, naturally endowed.

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- ¹ I am quoting from the Hamilton edition of Reid's *Works* (8th edition; Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1967). The remark cited is at 327b ('b' refers to the left-hand side of the page, 'a' to the right-hand side). From this point on, all references to and quotations from Reid's *Works* will simply be followed by a page number (and an 'a' or 'b') in square brackets.
- ² Not to be confused with the mental operation (/act) that is given the name "judgment".
- ³ In what follows, unless I stipulate otherwise, I do mean to be addressing the subject of the *operation* (rather than the faculty) of judgment.
- ⁴ It should be noted that, here, Reid has in mind the mature cognitive agent.
- ⁵ Hence, I suggest, Locke's maintaining that judgment is the faculty "whereby the mind takes its ideas to agree or disagree" [426a]. (We can understand the reference to ideas as stemming from Locke's prior theoretical commitment to 'the ideal theory', as Reid dubs it.)
- ⁶ Here I have in mind, in particular, the following passage: "How a sensation should instantly make us conceive and believe the existence of an external thing altogether unlike to it, I do not pretend to know; and *when I say that the one suggests the other, I do not mean to explain the manner of their connection, but to express a fact, which every one may be conscious of* — namely, that, by a law of our nature, such a conception and belief constantly and immediately follow the sensation" [131b, italics added; cf. 111a].
- ⁷ Keith Lehrer, *Thomas Reid*. London and New York: Routledge, 1989, page 144.