

Reid, Thomas (1710-1796)

PATRICK RYSIEW

Article Summary

Thomas Reid (1710-96) was a contemporary of both Hume and Kant. He was born in Strachan, near Aberdeen, and was a founder and central figure in the Scottish school of common sense philosophy. Educated at Marishal College, Aberdeen, Reid served as Librarian there, and then as Minister at New Machar. While regent at King's College, Reid co-founded the Aberdeen Philosophical Society, or Wise Club (1758), other members of which included George Campbell, Alexander Gerard, John Stewart, and James Beattie. During this period, Reid published his first major work, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764). That same year, he succeeded Adam Smith in the professorship of Moral Philosophy in Glasgow College, where he remained for the rest of his life. Reid published two other major works, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785), and *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (1788).

Reid himself claimed (2002) that his main achievement was having called into question the widely held view ("the theory of ideas") that the immediate object of thought is always some idea in the mind of the thinker, the sceptical tendencies of which Hume brought to full fruition. But his philosophy contains many important positive contributions beyond that, including an articulation of the first principles of common sense, which he took to be the foundation of all thought and action, philosophical or otherwise. In place of the theory of ideas, Reid defended direct theories of memory and perception. As part of his critique of Hume and his predecessors, Reid articulates a distinction between sensation and perception and provides an account of how experience extends our perceptual powers. Reid rejects a picture of the individual as cut off from the world, and as passively registering various images and feelings. Most of the mind's operations incorporate judgment, according to Reid. And our judgments, though fallible, yield knowledge of such matters as our nature and well-being require, including knowledge of material things and their properties, past events, states of others' minds, and moral and aesthetic facts.

Accompanying the movement away from the excessive, idea-centered individualism of previous theories is the emphasis Reid places on our deeply social nature. This shows up in his insistence that testimony is a basic source of knowledge, that some of the mind's fundamental operations are essentially social, that humans possess a natural language that provides a prereflective, preconventional means of communicative interaction, that the meaning of a term is not an idea but the typically public object to which it refers, and that most of our general conceptions are acquired in the course of learning a public language.

Reid insists that the locus of causal power is the agent, and that the self is not merely a material thing being pushed about by laws of nature. Science teaches us about the latter;

but such laws are merely the regularities according to which things occur, and it is no part of natural philosophy to inquire into the real, efficient causes of things – that is, the source of motion or change. Our moral and aesthetic judgments are no less objective, and no less capable of truth and falsity, than are our perceptual judgments, and they too are underwritten by first principles. In both his moral and aesthetic theories, Reid relies on comparisons with perception as part of his account of how we acquire the relevant knowledge.

1. Life

Thomas Reid (1710-96) was a contemporary of both Hume [[link: Hume, David](#)] and Kant [[link: Kant, Immanuel](#)], a central figure in the Scottish Enlightenment [[link: Enlightenment, Scottish](#)], and founder of the Scottish school of common sense philosophy [[link: Common Sense School](#)]. Reid was born exactly one year to the day before Hume, on April 26, 1710, in Strachan, near Aberdeen. Both sides of family were prominent in Scottish society and intellectual life. Reid began schooling at Kincardineshire, and at age twelve entered Marischal College, Aberdeen, with George Turnbull [[link: Turnbull, George](#)] as his regent. After receiving his B.A. degree in 1726, Reid studied theology and was licensed as a Presbyterian minister in 1731. After marrying (1740), serving as Librarian of New Marischal College (1733-1736), and then as minister at New Machar (1737-1751), Reid was appointed regent at King's College, Aberdeen (1751). While there, he co-founded the Aberdeen Philosophical Society [[link: Aberdeen Philosophical Society](#)], or Wise Club (1758), other members of which included George Campbell [[link: Campbell, George](#)], Alexander Gerard, John Stewart, and James Beattie [[link: Beattie, James](#)]. During this period, Reid produced and delivered (1753, 1756, 1759, 1762) his four Latin *Philosophical Orations*, and published his first major work, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, in 1764. That same year, Reid succeeded Adam Smith in the professorship of Moral Philosophy in Glasgow College. Reid remained there for the rest of his life. His work during this period culminated in the publication of his two other major works, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785) and *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (1788). Reid retired from teaching in 1790 and died October 7, 1796, survived by just one of his nine children.

2. Critique of the Theory of Ideas

Like Kant [[link: Kant, Immanuel](#)], Reid cited Hume's [[link: Hume, David](#)] *Treatise* (1739-40) as the main spur to his own philosophical work. As viewed by Reid, Hume's sceptical system was the natural consequence of the widely held view that one is directly acquainted only with one's ideas or impressions, and that various types of mental activity (memory, perception, reasoning, etc.) are operations on these specifically mental entities. According to this view, when I look skywards I do not see the sun, but only an immaterial idea of (or as of) it; when I remember the toast I had for breakfast, it is really an idea of which I am thinking; and so on. This "theory of ideas", Reid thought, was a Trojan horse – a seeming gift carrying death in its belly (1764: V.8). While it had been

generally received, it took Hume to reveal its inevitable sceptical conclusion. The intolerability of the latter led Reid to examine the theory's credentials.

In the ordinary sense (1785: I.i), an idea is a thought – an act of the mind directed at some object or property; to have an idea of something is simply to conceive of or apprehend it. (A conception is a bare having-in-mind, without judgment, and need not involve conceptualization or categorization.) Whereas, ideas in the *philosophical* sense are meant to be the immediate *objects* of all thought. Reid thinks that ideas taken in this sense “are a mere fiction of philosophers”: the theory of ideas is just bad theory.

Ideas in the philosophical sense are introduced to help explain various phenomena – e.g., how we are able to think of things that do not exist (past events, merely imaginary creatures, etc.), how the mind is able to interact with material things, the variability of perception, and so forth. In fact, Reid thinks, the arguments offered for the existence of ideas are both scanty and weak.

One such argument is found in Hume [link: Hume, David] (*Enquiry*, Section XII), who famously argued that “the slightest philosophy... teaches us, that nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image or perception”. Thus:

1. The table we see gets smaller as we move away from it.
2. The real table (suppose) does not get smaller.
3. So, the table we see is not the real table, but only a table-image, or idea.

Reid counters (1785: II.xiv) that the argument succeeds only if we conflate real and apparent magnitude, and that the diminution of the latter, as we move away from the table, is exactly what we would expect: given the table's actual, fixed magnitude, as we move away from it the visible angle it subtends will diminish. So, that the table looks smaller from a greater distance does nothing to support, and in fact runs contrary to, the supposition that the table is not what we are seeing. Analogous comments apply to other examples of the variability of perception.

Another argument on behalf of the theory of ideas is based on a presumed analogy with interactions between physical objects: an object cannot act or be acted upon by another unless there is contact between them; but material objects exist in the material world – they can affect the mind only via the ideas they occasion in the mind, for only such ideas are the same place as the mind. In response, Reid denies that, in perception, it is correct to say that the mind acts upon the object, or *vice versa*. (Reid is thinking of action as the exertion of some power or force by an agent. On this, see section 7.) More generally, while he has no objections to analogical arguments *per se*, Reid points out that these are apt only when the relevant objects or domains are similar; but, he says, the physical and mental realms are as different as anything of which we are aware (1785: I.iv, e.g.).

So, there is no good reason to believe that ideas, in the philosophical sense, are real. In addition, they fail to fulfill their intended theoretical function of helping us understand various mental phenomena. Thus, once we grant that we never perceive tables, etc., but only ideas or images, it becomes hard to see, not just how we justify any beliefs in the latter, but how we could even form any thoughts or conceptions of such things. This,

again, is something that Hume [link: Hume, David], following Berkeley [link: Berkeley, George], clearly saw. In this way, ideas usurp objects, interaction with which they were meant to explain (1785: II.xii; see 1989, Oration III) – they seem, Reid says, “to have something in their nature unfriendly to other existences” (1764: II.vi).

What is more, putting images in the mind does not explain how we are able to perceive even them, since in general contiguity does not make for perceptual or otherwise intentional relations. The book on the table does not perceive the table; a photo album does not perceive the images within it; etc. The theory of ideas thus seems to take for granted, and not to explain, the intentionality or ‘aboutness’ of thought (1989, Oration III; 1764: VI.xii; 1785: II.xiv).

In short, the theory of ideas is a mere *hypothesis* in the pejorative sense. That is, it violates the first rule of philosophizing Newton [link: Newton, Isaac] had laid down in his *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687): “We are to admit no more causes of natural things than such as are both true and sufficient to explain their appearances”. Reid concludes that it should be rejected with disdain as a fiction that has no place in genuine philosophy (1785: I.iii).

3. Conception, Sensation, Perception

Reid asks: “Since we ought to pay no regard to hypotheses, and to be very suspicious of analogical reasoning, it may be asked, From what source must the knowledge of the mind and its faculties be drawn?” (1785: I.v). His answer is, observation and experiment (1764: I.i). More specifically, Reid holds that “an anatomy of the human mind” aimed at uncovering its basic powers and principles must be based chiefly on accurate reflection upon the operations of our own minds -- other, subservient sources of such knowledge are attention to the structure of language, and to behavior (1785: I.v). Such attentive reflection requires patience and practice, and is to be distinguished from mere consciousness, which is the immediate knowledge one has of one’s mind’s operations.

As Reid sees it, the theory of ideas was able to enjoy the popularity that it did only because philosophers had not paid close enough attention to what actually happens in the mind. For example, when I touch a hard surface, I get a particular tactile sensation or feeling. If I attend to it carefully, I find that this feeling is wholly unlike the hardness of the surface that occasions it – just as the pain I feel is wholly unlike the sharp end of the needle by which I am pricked. The sensation itself is not *about* anything; it possesses no intrinsic intentionality. According to Berkeley and Hume, I should not indeed be able even to conceive of hardness – i.e., the cohesion of the parts of a body so as to resist displacement – since, according to them, one can conceive only of what resembles some idea (or impression, or sensation) (1764: V.viii). Reid agrees that no amount of reasoning from the sensation alone could ever lead one to a conception of hardness, or indeed of any other material property, if one did not already have it. (This is the force of his *experimentum crucis* – 1764: V.vi-vii.) And yet, when I have this sensation, a conception of hardness immediately follows. I might have that conception in the absence of a hard thing, of course, as when I am asked to imagine a hard surface. But in perception we are so constructed that the conception is immediately followed by a belief in the existence of

a hard thing.

In addition to casting further doubt on the theory of ideas, the foregoing illustrates Reid's general view of how perception works: a sensation immediately suggests a conception and belief of the present existence of the relevant property or thing. Reid is explicit (1764: II.vii) that 'suggests' here is not meant to explain the transition from sensation to conception and belief, but only to mark an observed phenomenon. Still, he seeks to clarify what happens in perception by comparing it with language. Thus, we rarely attend to the sounds or marks in language; nor do linguistic signs typically resemble or bear any intrinsic connection to what they signify. However, when produced, they lead the competent hearer to form a thought of the thing meant. In the same way, the signs in perception – typically, sensations -- draw our attention only when they are especially pleasant, unpleasant, or unusual. Further, they do not generally resemble what they signify, and their connection with what they signify is contingent and so importantly arbitrary. (An exception is visible figure, the non-Euclidean features of which bear a mathematical relation to the real, Euclidean figure it signifies.) Nonetheless, given how we are constituted, these signs introduce in the mind of the properly constituted perceiver a conception and belief of the existence of the relevant object or property.

In some cases, the transition to the relevant conception and belief happens only because the perceiver has had certain experiences, or undergone certain training, implicit or explicit. For example, Reid agrees with Berkeley that we do not originally see the three-dimensional properties of objects, but learn to do so. Likewise, it is only thanks to experience that a given auditory sensation prompts in me the thought that the church bell is ringing. These are acquired perceptions (e.g., 1785: II.xxi) – which, Reid says, make up most of our perceptions. Our original perceptions are much fewer: here, prior to any kind of experience, certain sensations (signs) conjure up the relevant conception and belief due solely to a principle of our constitution. (This sort of claim led Hume [[link: Hume, David](#)] to suspect that Reid was committed to the existence of innate ideas -- see Hume's letter to Blair [[link: Blair, Hugh](#)] in Reid 1964/1997.) Besides that of hardness, our conceptions of the self (*qua* subject of mental operations), and of power, for example, while perhaps triggered by certain experiences, are not and could not be abstracted therefrom. While they are not present from birth, neither are they merely the products of experience.

4. Common Sense and First Principles

As we carry out an investigation of the human mind some of the principles we uncover are quite particular. For example, in original perception, it is by a particular principle of our constitution that a given tactile sensation suggests hardness, and by another particular principle that some sensation signifies motion. What explains the relevant transitions from signs to conceptions of things signified in acquired perceptions, by contrast, is a general principle of our constitution – namely, the inductive principle, whereby “when we have found two things to have been constantly conjoined in the course of nature, the appearance of one of them is immediately followed by the conception and belief of the other” (1764: VI.xxiv).

Reid takes it as obvious that there must be such general principles, and that their evidence must be intuitive – i.e., that they not rely upon other things for support (1785: VI.iv). It is our possessing common sense -- a particular degree of reason, which enables good judgment and rational action, and entitles us to the denomination of reasonable creatures – that allows us to recognize such principles as self-evident (1785: VI.ii). Reid divides these first principles of common sense into two groups: first principles of necessary truths, and first principles of contingent truths (1785: VI.v-vi). The former include metaphysical principles such as that whatever begins to exist must have a cause, as well as moral principles such as that an unjust action has more demerit than an ungenerous one. In addition to the inductive principle, the latter include such propositions as that the things of which I am conscious, and which I distinctly remember or perceive, do exist, that testimony is a fundamental source of evidence, and that the natural faculties, by which we distinguish truth from error, are not fallacious. Besides our immediate and irresistible natural judgment that they are correct, Reid thinks that there are various defeasible marks of such first principles: that their denial leads to absurdity, that they are universal across cultures and times, that they are practically indispensable, and so on.

Because first principles are *first* principles, there is nothing more basic from which one might argue for them. A large part of their defense consists in placing them “in a proper point of view” (1785: I.ii) – i.e., in displaying the axiomatic status they enjoy in all our thought and action, and in showing that attempts to deny them inevitably involve some sort of inconsistency, and so merely illustrate their fundamentality after all. For instance, any argument for regarding perceptual beliefs as suspect will take the reliability of reason for granted; but reason is fallible too, and to favor reason over perception is arbitrary. Likewise, even the Humean sceptic never doubted consciousness; but, as the controversy over the reality of ideas shows (above), error is possible about the mind’s operations as well. As to total sceptics, who purport to place no trust in any of their faculties, there is nothing to say: not only can we not reason with them, but by hypothesis they have no reason for their position, and can lead normal-looking lives only insofar as they do, implicitly, rely on their naturally-given faculties.

5. Memory, Personal Identity, the Self

Among the first principles of contingent truths are those stating, “that those things did really happen which I distinctly remember”, “that the thoughts of which I am conscious, are the thoughts of a being which I call MYSELF, my MIND, my PERSON”, and “Our own personal identity and continued existence, as far back as we remember anything distinctly” (1785: VI.v). Along with perception and consciousness, for example, memory is an original faculty of the mind; as such, it is unaccountable. In remembering, we have a conception and immediate belief of some past event. How this happens, we do not know; memory is no less mysterious than would be prescience – an immediate knowledge of future events. Attempts to explain memory by appeal to impressions in the brain or images in the mind at best merely postpone the question of how the relevant power is possible at all (1785: VII.vii). And yet, we have no doubt that we do possess such a

power, and that, when distinct, memory yields knowledge as certain as any grounded on demonstration (1785: III.ii).

Just as the remembrance of some past event is always accompanied by a conception and belief of its (past) existence, it is always accompanied too by the conviction of our own existence at the time the event happened. I cannot remember having smelled the fragrance of a rose without supposing myself, as the subject of that experience, to have been the one who had it. So there can be no memory without the conviction that one existed at the time remembered (1785: III.iv). In this way, remembrance presumes a conviction of my own continued existence and identity at least as far back as the remembered event.

Because memory inevitably presupposes personal identity, Locke's [\[link: Locke, John\]](#) attempt (*Essay*: II. xxvii.6) to explain personal identity in terms of memory cannot be correct (1785: III.vi). Locke had claimed that personal identity consists in "consciousness alone", with a person's identity extending only so far as his/her remembrance of any past thought or action. In addition to presuming, via the notion of memory ("consciousness"), what it sets out to explain, Locke's account commits the related error of conflating personal identity with the evidence one has of it from memory; but to say that the testimony is the cause of the thing testified is absurd. Further, as Reid's example of the brave officer illustrates, Locke's account leads to violations of the transitivity of identity.

The identity of a person is perfect – an all or nothing matter. While memory assures us of our own past existence and continued identity, our conviction of the identity of others of course relies on other grounds, such as testimony, and the latter evidence does admit of degrees. Still, a person is perfectly the same, or not identical at all. The identity of the objects of sense, by contrast, is never perfect, as they consist of innumerable parts and are subject to continual change (1785: III.iv). So persons cannot be identical to their bodies. What is the self, then? Reid says little, beyond that the self is the indivisible subject of the various powers and operations of the mind. "Whatever this self may be, it is something which thinks, and deliberates, and resolves, and acts, and suffers. I am not thought, I am not action, I am not feeling; I am something that thinks, and acts, and suffers" (1785: III.iv). The conception and belief of the existence of such a being is naturally and unavoidably prompted in all normally functioning humans (1764: II.vii).

6. Primary and Secondary Qualities

The distinction between primary and secondary qualities [\[link: Primary-secondary distinction\]](#) traces back to early Greek atomists [\[link: Atomism, Ancient\]](#). Later revived, and given canonical statement in Locke [\[link: Locke, John\]](#), the distinction is a metaphysical one: some qualities (extension, figure, solidity, etc.) are really in objects; but others (color, taste, sound, etc.) are in objects only insofar as the latter tend to elicit certain types of sensation in us. Reid agrees that there is a distinction to be drawn here, but he denies that it is metaphysical: primary and secondary qualities are equally real, and equally objective features of objects. Nor is the distinction that primary qualities resemble the sensations or conceptions they occasion. For, like Berkeley [\[link: Berkeley, George\]](#), Reid holds that an idea (sensation, conception) can only be like another idea -- a

sensation of red does not resemble whatever it is that gives both the rose and the apple the power to cause that sensation in me; the sensation of hardness does not resemble the cohesion of the parts of the body so as to resist separation.

According to Reid (1785: II.xvii), the real basis of the primary-secondary quality distinction is that the senses give us direct and distinct conceptions of primary qualities, informing us what they are in themselves. Thus, the conception of hardness I get when I touch a table is direct and distinct; while I may be ignorant of its cause, I know what hardness is in itself – there is nothing more to learn on that score. Whereas, the conceptions the senses give us of secondary qualities are relative and obscure. When I see a red apple, for example, I know only that it is so constituted as to produce a characteristic type of sensation in me. As to what the color *qua* property of the apple is, my senses do not tell me, though the scientist might; I can refer to that unknown cause only by reference to the sensation, which bears a “capital part” of my conception of it (1785: II.xvii). (Unlike Locke [[link: Locke, John](#)], Reid does not identify the secondary quality with the object’s tendency to produce certain sensations in us, but rather with the underlying quality or qualities that give it that power.)

7. Power, Causation, Agency

In his discussion of the primary-secondary quality distinction (see section 6), Reid seems to take it for granted that relative conceptions must be indistinct or obscure. In his later work (1788: I.i), he makes it clear that “our relative conceptions are not always less distinct”. A case in point is our conception of power. Like those of hardness, the self, and body, our notion of power cannot be copied or abstracted from any experience. It is not something we witness in the natural world; but it is not an operation of the mind either, and therefore is not an object of consciousness. While every operation of the mind is the exertion of some power, we are conscious of the operation only. Nevertheless, a distinct conception of power as what, when exerted, gives rise to certain effects, arises naturally as soon as we are aware of ourselves as producing some change through an act of the will (“Of Power”, in Haldane and Read eds.).

Reid considers Locke’s [[link: Locke, John](#)] talk of passive power (*Essay* II.xxi.1-2) – e.g., the power of the wax to be melted by the flame – to be an abuse of language. The only genuine power is active power; for only active power, when exerted, can be an efficient cause – that is, what makes something happen, bringing about some change (see Aristotle [[link: Aristotle](#)], section 9). We might speak of the flame as the cause of the wax’s melting, but such talk of physical causes is not to be taken literally: matter can only be an instrument in the hands of a true cause; ‘a physical cause’ refers only to something that, by the laws of nature, is always followed by a certain effect. As to such laws, we might speak of them as causes, as when we say that the apple fell from the tree because of the law of gravitation. But this too is loose talk: “The laws of nature are the rules according to which the effects are produced; but there must be a cause which operates according to these rules. The rules of navigation never navigated a ship; the rules of architecture never built a house” (1788: I.vi).

For Reid, the only real causes are efficient causes; and the only efficient causes are agents – that is, “beings that have understanding and will” (1788: I.v). Amongst physical things and events, then, there is for Reid no causation proper, but only constant conjunction. On this, Hume was right. But we should not infer that that is all there is to causation, or that we have, and can have, no real conception of power. We do have such a conception, and it is a first principle that whatever begins to exist must have a cause which produces it (1785: VI.vi). With respect to the sphere of human conduct, we have a natural conviction of ourselves as the cause of our voluntary actions (1785: VI.v). As to the extra-human natural world, especially in letters to Kames [[link: Homes, Henry \(Lord Kames\)](#)] and Gregory, Reid insists, following Newton [[link: Newton, Isaac](#)], that the discovery of efficient causes falls outside of natural philosophy, which can take us only so far as establishing fundamental laws of nature. What can be known of the agent or efficient cause lying behind these must be left to metaphysics or natural theology (2002; 1788: I.vi).

8. Action and Principles of Action

That we have active power does not mean that we always act from it. In the strict sense, an action is an exertion of active power, which requires that the agent conceive and will to do something. However, when issues of moral responsibility are not of concern, our talk of actions is more liberal. So too, when thinking of action in the broad sense, more things are allowed to be principles of action than those that bear upon voluntary actions. Mechanical principles of actions include instincts and habits. The former (e.g., blinking, breathing) are natural; the latter are acquired, most often thanks to instinctive imitation. Both operate without any will or intention, though we can attempt to hinder their operation by a voluntary effort. Animal principles of action include appetites (e.g., hunger, lust), desires (e.g., for power, esteem, or knowledge), and both malevolent and benevolent affections, which take other persons as their objects. These require intention and will in their operation, and so actions arising from them can be voluntary; but they do not require judgment or reason. The latter is required by rational principles of action, however; these can have no existence in beings not endowed with reason and, in all their exertions, require not only intention and will but judgment or reason as well (1788: III).

9. Motives and Liberty

To have (active) power, or to be an agent-cause, is to have power to cause a change. The power is distinct from its exertion: I have the power to speak even when I remain silent. Power and necessity are contraries, Reid says: the power to speak implies a power not to walk. What free action – moral liberty, as Reid calls it -- requires is not merely that we have such a power with regard to our actions, as Locke had suggested. Locke says (*Essay* II.xxi.21) that one is free with respect to some action just in case one has the power to perform the action if one wills and the power to refrain from performing it if one wills. But this is compatible with one's being unfree with regard to the relevant volitions themselves. What genuine freedom requires, then, is power *over the determinations of*

our will – i.e., the power to will or not to will some action (1788: IV.i).

Reid holds that it is a first principle that we indeed have such a power (1785: VI.v), and he likens this conviction to our belief in the existence of the material world. Reid fends off arguments on behalf of the contrary view, according to which the efficient cause of behavior is never the agent. According to one such argument, human behavior is invariably the result of a person's motives, with various motives always having certain characteristic effects, and with the strongest motive always prevailing as the efficient cause of the action. Aside from the fact that motives are not the right sort of thing that might possess active power, and so be an efficient cause, Reid is sceptical that the influence of motives is fixed by any laws of nature, such that they always have the same effects in the same circumstances, and such that the strongest motive always prevails (1788: IV.iv). Different things might be meant by 'strongest motive', but on no reading is the claim that the strongest motive always prevails both plausible and informative. If the test of strength is prevalence, then to say that the strongest motive always prevails is trivial and uninformative. Two other candidate measures of strength are "the animal test" – the degree of felt strength of some motive – and "the rational test" -- the degree to which something is judged fit to be pursued by the agent. These have the virtue of distinguishing strength of motive from sheer prevalence. However, Reid says, on either of these measures it is clear that we often fail to act in accordance with the strongest motive: it is a matter of common observation that sometimes people do what they judge to be most worthy, or what they have the strongest felt urge to do, but that sometimes they do not. Indeed, some of the things we do with forethought and will are done without any motive at all. This is so in the case of trifling actions: I am conscious of no motive for using this bill, rather than that one, to pay for my groceries; to say that there must be a motive for my doing so is an arbitrary supposition without any evidence.

A perhaps more fundamental objection to the idea that a person always acts on the strongest motive is that it appears to be largely motivated by a presumed analogy with the behavior of physical objects. It is assumed that competing motives, in particular, are like weights placed on opposite scales of a balance: the balance can tip only if one weight is heavier; and when one is heavier, the balance must tip that way (1785: I.iv). Reid is highly suspicious of presumed analogies between physical objects and their interaction and the mind and its operations (see section 2), and the present example is no exception. Motives, Reid says, are not like weights in a balance; rational motives, for example, are like advice – they convince, but they do not impel. That an agent's action is not the result of motives, or of prior conditions generally, does not mean that it is uncaused or capricious. Nor must an agent's willing some action be the result of some prior volition, in such a way as to invite a regress. It is the agent who initiates change; via determination of the will by an exertion of active power, the agent makes things happen.

In addition to criticizing arguments for thinking that we lack moral liberty, Reid presents three arguments that meant to show that humans are free (1788: IV.vi-viii). The first is that we have a natural conviction that we act freely. The second is that our holding people morally accountable for their actions presumes that they act freely. The third is that we are capable of successfully prosecuting complex actions; since these cannot be contrived

without understanding, nor carried out without power, it is once again natural to see such actions as demonstrating that we are free in our actions.

The intended force of such arguments is not altogether clear. They seem to presume, rather than to demonstrate, that we have moral liberty. Perhaps this is not surprising: insofar as it is a first principle that we have moral liberty, it is not the sort of thing that can be proven. Nevertheless, the arguments for liberty would still have the important function of helping to place the relevant principle in a proper point of view, showing just how deeply committed to it we are, thereby confirming its status as a first principle.

10. Morals, Rights, and Justice

Again (see section 8), Reid holds that rational principles of action can have no existence in beings not endowed with judgment or reason. According to Reid, the two such principles, or ends of human action, are what is good for us upon the whole, and what appears to be our duty (1788: III.iii). These are distinct but, Reid says, they pick out the same actions: what is good for one upon the whole is what is one's duty; so happiness and morality are not in competition. However, a concern with one's good upon the whole is an inferior principle: a correct application of the principle would require a more extensive view of one's life, and of the likely outcomes of various courses of action, than we are capable of; further, a life lived solely with a view to one's own good would not be deserving of the same praise as one aimed at doing what duty requires. So although a regard to our good upon the whole is a rational principle of action, if it were the only such principle it would be more uncertain, and give less perfection and happiness to our character, than when joined with a regard to duty (1788 III.iii.4).

It is by moral sense, conscience, or the moral faculty that one learns to judge what is right and wrong. Reid's use of the term 'sense' here should not mislead. In general, for Reid, 'sense' connotes judgment, and he refers to the senses, for example, as judging faculties (1785: VI.i). Thus, moral approbation and disapprobation are not mere feelings; they "impl[y] a real judgment" (1788: V.vii), which can be true or false. Further, while our moral judgments are accompanied by feelings, the feelings follow the judgments, rather than the reverse. We may, then, be able to infer from a statement of some action's wrongness that the action gave the speaker a disagreeable feeling, and that the speaker would be willing to say as much. But it is contrary to all the rules of grammar and rhetoric to suppose that the latter statement has the same meaning as the former. Moreover, it is simply incredible that apparent expressions of judgment – as in, "What S did was wrong" – are in all cases used to express what is no judgment at all, but merely a feeling 1788: V.vii).

Reid describes some first principles of morals (1788: V.i) that will appear to every mind free of prejudice to be self-evident. These include that humans are not born for themselves only, and that we ought to act towards another in a manner that we would judge to be right in one who acts towards us. Reid thinks people may be ignorant of such principles; a perception of even the most obvious truths requires ripeness of judgment, and a clear and steady conception of the things about which we judge. Moral instruction

has a role to play, then, and it can be aided by a systematic presentation of morals. However, a system of morals is not like a system of geometry, in which the evidence of one part depends of that of the parts that precede it; it is more like a system of botany, in that the arrangement of the various parts is meant to facilitate apprehension and memory, and not to give evidence (1788: V.ii).

A grasp of the first principles of morals would hardly suffice for leading a good life. The principles fall far short of classifying specific actions as right or wrong. Our knowledge of the latter sort of facts requires proper exercise of the moral sense mentioned above, which Reid likens to our more familiar perceptual faculties. Speaking of the tremendous power of vision, he remarks on how it would amaze a being not gifted with sight that “by this organ [the eye], we can often perceive what is straight and what is crooked in the mind as well as in the body” (1764: VI.i). More generally, he describes how the morally relevant features of other’s minds -- their intentions, character, etc. -- are known to us through observing their outward signs, in the same manner as in perception generally various signs prompt conception and belief of the relevant objectual properties: “We perceive one man to be open, another cunning; one to be ignorant, another very knowing; one to be slow of understanding, another quick. Every man forms such judgments of those he converses with; and the common affairs of life depend upon such judgments. We can as little avoid them as we can avoid seeing what is before our eyes. From this it appears, that it is no less a part of the human constitution, to judge of men's characters, and of their intellectual powers, from the signs of them in their actions and discourse, than to judge of corporeal objects by our senses” (1785: VI.vi).

Moral instruction may be aided by the presentation of a system of natural jurisprudence, or of rights (1788: V.iii). While rights and duties are far from the same, like credit and debt they are so related that one who understands the one must understand the other. Specifically, every right implies a corresponding duty. To the imperfect duty of charity, for example, corresponds an imperfect right to charitable aid. In this way, a system of rights “comprehends the whole duty we owe to our fellow-men”.

Some of our rights are natural or innate. The rights to safety of one’s person, to liberty, to one’s goods, and to fidelity to engagements, are grounded in one’s nature as a rational and moral agent (1788: V.v). Reid responds to Humean [[link: Hume, David](#)] arguments that justice is an artificial virtue – that it is merely conventional, and grounded in considerations of utility. We have a conception of contracts, engagements, or promises, for example, that is prior to any considerations of social utility (1788: V.vi). Further, any purely conventional arrangement would require some prior means of establishing agreement or consent; and the latter notions in turn themselves already imply an understanding that one is obliged to do what one has agreed to do. So public utility cannot be the sole origin of the branch of justice concerning contracts. Similar arguments apply to our other natural rights.

11. Language, Communication, and Social Operations

As explained in section 10, Reid holds that promising or entering into a contract cannot be purely conventional. Along with requesting or receiving information and asking or accepting a favor, promising is an example of a “social operation of the mind”. Unlike solitary operations such as judging, conceiving, perceiving, and willing, social operations cannot exist without other intelligent beings (1785: I.viii; 1788: V.vi). Such social operations are as natural as the solitary; so too, they are simple, and not unanalyzable in terms of some more basic operations.

Social acts cannot exist without being expressed (1788: V.vi). But there must be some means of expressing such acts prior to the invention of artificial language (English, Spanish, Hindi, etc.). In artificial language the signs signify what they do because of convention (1764: V.iii). Locke had held that we invent language to enable inter-personal communication (*Essay* II.ii.1-2). But there can be no compact or agreement – hence, no establishing of any convention -- without some prior means of communicating. So there must be a natural language, the signs of which “have a meaning which every man understands by the principles of his nature” (1764: V.iii). Thus, a certain gesture is naturally read as ostensive, a smile as indicating pleasure or assent, and so on. (Other signs are implicated in our knowledge of the motives and traits relevant to moral judgments: see section 10.) When we witness these signs we immediately pass to a conception and belief of the relevant thoughts of others.

While the social operations of the mind are just as natural and important as the solitary, they, and the expression necessary for their existence, have been neglected (1785: I.viii; 2004). Philosophers’ focus on solitary operations, and their preoccupation with the proposition -- the complete sentence, which is the expression of the solitary act of judgment – gives an incomplete and misleading picture of both language and the powers of the human mind.

Reid’s lament that philosophers have fixated exclusively on certain forms of speech anticipates the complaints of mid-twentieth century philosophers such as Austin [[link: Austin, John Langshaw](#)] and Wittgenstein [[link: Wittgenstein, Ludwig Josef Johann](#)]. Reid also anticipates developments in pragmatics, as when he offers proto-Gricean [[link: Grice, Herbert Paul](#)] explanations of the (in)felicity of certain forms of speech. For instance, the evidence we have that there is such a city as Rome is probable, not demonstrative. But it would sound odd to say that it is probable that there is such a city as Rome, as that would imply some degree of doubt or uncertainty (1785: VII.iii).

Examples such as this counteract a certain reading of Reid’s claim that language “is the express image and picture of human thoughts; and from the picture we may draw some certain conclusions concerning the original” (1785: I.ii). What it is appropriate to say can diverge from what one means; particular forms of speech can mislead. In terms of its most general features, however – e.g., a distinction between nouns and adjectives, between active and passive verbs, or between the mind, its operations, and the objects of thought -- language provide insight into human cognition. Finding such features to be characteristic of all languages, we may infer that we naturally conceive of the world in terms of subjects and qualities, that perception and other operations are taken to have mind-independent objects, that we have a notion of active power, and so on.

As to the signs deployed in artificial language, Reid's general view is that "[t]he meaning of the word is the thing conceived; and that meaning is the conception affixed to it by those who best understand the language" (1785: IV.i). This gives rise to a puzzle. Reid holds that, apart from proper names, which signify individual things or persons, all other words of language are general, "not appropriated to signify any one individual thing, but equally related to many" (1785: I.i). However, Reid agrees with his empiricist predecessors that everything that exists is a particular; so there are no general objects, so to speak, to serve as the referents of general terms. Such terms do not of course refer to ideas in the philosophical sense, for Reid denies that these exist. Nor do they refer to the general conceptions that occur in the minds of those who use the language. For a conception is always a particular mental act; a conception is general only insofar as it has a general object. But general objects, once again, do not exist according to Reid.

Reid's way out here is to deny that attributes (universals) or kinds of things must exist if we are to conceive of them: we can conceive of things that neither do nor ever did exist (1785: V.v). Such general thoughts (conceptions), to which no existent corresponds, are made possible by three operations of the mind: analyzing a subject into its known attributes, and giving a name to each; observing one or more of these attributes to be common to many subjects; and combining into a whole several of these attributes and giving that combination a name. The first two underlie our capacity to think of universals; the third is what underlies the formation of conceptions of *genera* and *species*. However, in most cases, one learns the meanings of (general) terms by induction, observing how competent language user employ the terms and deploying them similarly oneself (1785: V.ii). In this way, "[t]he labour of forming abstract notions, is the labour of learning to speak, and to understand what is spoken" (EIP V.vi).

12. Aesthetics: Taste and its Objects

'Taste' is used to refer to the power of the mind by which we appreciate both the beauties of nature and whatever is excellent in the fine arts. It is so-called because of its resemblance to "the external sense of taste" -- which, Reid agrees, it resembles (1785: VIII.i). What Reid has said previously (see section 10) about the senses as judging faculties, and about moral judgments as real judgments which lie behind our feelings of (dis)approbation, illuminates his view here. With external taste, we can distinguish between the agreeable gustatory sensation and the objectual property that occasions it and which we judge to be present. With the "internal power of taste", we can distinguish between the agreeable emotion it produces in us and the excellence that produces it, and which we judge to be present in the work. Here too, then, Reid denies that the relevant sense is merely a passive conduit for certain feelings, and that the relevant judgments are not judgments at all but mere expressions of sentiment. There are first principles or axioms in matters of taste, reflecting our common judgments about such matters. ("I never heard of any man who thought it a beauty in a human face to want a nose, or an eye, or to have the mouth on one side," Reid says (1785: VI.vi).) Such variety as we find in matters of taste, whether external or internal, is the result of habit and fashion.

The qualities of things that, by nature, are adapted to please a good sense of taste are novelty, grandeur, and beauty (1785: I.ii). The pleasure we take in novel objects is related to our natural curiosity; it should not, as it sometimes is, be separated from conceptions of genuine worth and utility. Grandeur is a degree of excellence that merits our admiration (1785: I.iii). It is found originally and properly in qualities of mind – knowledge, power, wisdom, virtue, for example -- and only derivatively in objects of sense: a painting is grand not in itself, but insofar as it expresses certain excellences of the mind of the painter.

Beauty is a related though distinct object of taste (1785: VIII.iv). The various things we judge beautiful – a poem, a palace, a piece of music, or a face – possess different types of beauty. What they share is a tendency to produce both agreeable emotions or feelings and a belief that the object exhibits some perfection or excellence. Some judgments of beauty, like the naïve admiration of the colors and forms of flowers, are instinctive: they occur without reflection, and without our being able to say why we find the object beautiful. Others, like the expert mechanic's admiration of a well-constructed machine, are rational: they are grounded on a quality of the object that is distinctly conceived, and that may be specified.

A final distinction is between original and derived beauty. Like grandeur, the former belongs only to certain qualities of mind – kindness, humanity, and certain affections and sentiments with regard to others, for example. The beauty of an object exhibiting the natural signs of such qualities is derived. The beauty of a well-bred person's behavior is an example; its beauty reflects that of the qualities of character such behavior signifies.

Keywords: Common sense; Scottish Philosophy; Scottish Enlightenment; Scepticism

See also: Scottish Philosophy; Aberdeen Philosophical Society; Common Sense School; Enlightenment, Scottish; Perception, Epistemic Issues in; Perception; Sense-data; Primary-secondary distinction; Personal Identity; Action; Will, the; Causation; Common-sense Ethics; Moral sense theories; Certainty; Foundationalism; Scepticism; Commonsensism; Beauty; Buffier, Claude; Oswald, James

Works

Reid, T. (1885) *Philosophical Works*, 8th edition, W. Hamilton ed. New York: Georg Olms Verlag. (Includes Reid's three major works, various letters, and some manuscripts. Formerly the standard edition of Reid, it has been superseded by the fine Edinburgh editions listed below; these include substantive Introductory essays and other valuable editorial and scholarly materials.)

Reid, T. (1989) *The Philosophical Orations of Thomas Reid*, ed. and with an Introduction by D. D. Todd, trans. from the Latin by S. D. Sullivan. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press. (Four previously unpublished lectures delivered prior

to the publication of the *Inquiry*. Oration III (1759) provides incisive critique of the theory of ideas. Includes a helpful introductory essay and summaries of the lectures.)

Reid, T. (1995) *Thomas Reid on the Animate Creation: Papers Relating to the Life Sciences*, ed. P. Wood, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. (Brings together manuscripts concerning natural history, physiology, and materialism.)

Reid, T. (1764/1997) *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, ed. D. R. Brookes. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. (Reid's first major work. While focused on the five senses, it includes important discussions of philosophical methodology, scepticism, the primary-secondary quality distinction, language, and testimony. This edition includes the Hume-Reid exchange, which itself contains Reid's Abstract of the *Inquiry*.)

Reid, T. (1785/2002) *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, ed. D. R. Brookes. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. (Reid's second major work. The discussion of the senses complements that of the *Inquiry*. Also included are discussions of memory, abstraction, reasoning, taste, judgment, and the first principles of common sense.)

Reid, T. (1788/2010) *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*, ed. K. Haakonssen and James A. Harris. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. (Reid's third major work. It addresses active power, the will, action, motives, freedom, and morals.)

Reid, T. (2002) *The Correspondence of Thomas Reid*, ed. P. Wood. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. (Brings together Reid's exchanges with the likes of Kames, Stewart, Gregory, and Hume. The letters provide further, welcome insight into Reid's views.)

Reid, T. (2004) *Thomas Reid on Logic, Rhetoric, and the Fine Arts*, ed. A. Broadie. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. (Lecture materials concerning the culture – or cultivation – of the human mind, centering on the topics of logic, rhetoric, and the fine arts.)

Reid, T. (2007) *Thomas Reid on Practical Ethics*, ed. K. Haakonssen, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. (Collects various lectures and papers on morals, justice, and law.)

Reid, T. (2015) *Thomas Reid on Society and Politics*, ed. K. Haakonssen and P. Wood. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. (Manuscripts concerning the Scottish political, social and economic scene.)

Reid, T. (2017) *Thomas Reid on Mathematics and Natural Philosophy*, ed. P. Wood. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. (An introductory essay reconstructing Reid's career as mathematician and natural philosopher is followed by manuscripts in which Reid addresses topics in these areas.)

References and Further Reading

Copenhaver, R. and T. Buras eds. (2015) *Mind, Knowledge and Action: Essays in Honour of Reid's Tercentenary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. (A collection of new essays on various aspects of Reid's philosophy, including philosophy of mind, perception, epistemology, aesthetics, and justice.)

Cuneo, T., and R. van Woudenberg eds. (2004) *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid*, New York: Cambridge University Press. (Papers by leading scholars on all major aspects of Reid's philosophy. Includes chronology of events relating to Reid and his context and a substantial bibliography. An essential collection.)

Daniels, N. (1974) *Thomas Reid's Inquiry: The Geometry of Visibles and the Case for Realism*, New York: Franklin. (A non-technical discussion of Reid's non-Euclidean geometry of visibles.)

De Bary, P. (2002) *Thomas Reid and Scepticism: His Reliabilist Response*, New York: Routledge. (A clear and focused study of Reid's response to scepticism that casts Reid's views as an early instance of reliabilist epistemology.)

Dalgarno, M. and E. Matthews eds. (1989) *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid*, Dordrecht, Boston, MA and London: Kluwer. (An important collection of papers on perception, knowledge, common sense, mind and action, aesthetics, morals, and politics. Includes a useful Reid bibliography.)

Gallie, R.D. (1989) *Thomas Reid and 'The Way of Ideas'*, Dordrecht, Boston, MA and London: Kluwer. (An introduction to Reid's philosophy through discussion of his views on perception, conception, linguistic meaning, active power, personal identity, and common sense and first principles.)

Haldane, J. (2000) 'Thomas Reid: Life and Work', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 74(3): 317-344. (An engaging overview of Reid's life and work, followed by a very useful bibliography of writings by and about Thomas Reid. This same issue includes ten other papers on Reid, including articles on the role of God in Reid's epistemology and the bearing of Reid's views on contracting upon feminist critiques of the contract model in ethics.)

____ and S. Read eds. (2003) *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid: A Collection of Essays*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. (A collection of original essays on various aspects of Reid's philosophy, including common sense, epistemology, philosophy of mind, fictional objects, the primary-secondary quality distinction, and the geometry of visibles. Includes the previously unpublished manuscript, 'Of Power', dated March 13, 1792.)

Kivy, P. (1973) *Thomas Reid's Lectures on the Fine Arts*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff. (While the text is based on lecture notes not written in Reid's hand, it is a valuable resource for those with a strong interest in Reid's aesthetics. The text overlaps with that of Reid 2004.)

Ledwig, M. (2005) *Reid's Philosophy of Psychology*, Lanham, Boulder: University Press of America. (An account of Reid's views on appetites, desires, emotion, causation, and rational action.)

Lehrer, K. (1989) *Thomas Reid*, London: Routledge. (A recounting of the major features and claims of Reid's three main philosophical works – the *Inquiry*, and the two *Essays*. Aims to make clear the significance of Reid's work and its relevance to contemporary theorizing. A very good general introduction and overview.)

Lemos, N. (2004) *Common Sense*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (A defense of the common sense tradition in philosophy, including its bearing on ethics; includes critical discussion of Reid in relation to the issue of epistemic circularity.)

Marcil-Lacoste, L. (1982) *Claude Buffier and Thomas Reid: Two Common Sense Philosophers*, McGill-Queen's University Press. (Critically compares and assesses Buffier and Reid's philosophies, with a view to defending the general importance of common sense philosophy. Includes Reid's previously unpublished *Curâ Primâ* on Common Sense (1768/9).)

Nichols, R. (2007) *Thomas Reid's Theory of Perception* (An in-depth and systematic study of Reid's views on perception, including the primary-secondary quality distinction, perceptual learning, and the Molyneux problem.)

_____, and G. Yaffe, "Thomas Reid", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/reid/>. (A very good critical overview of the main aspects of Reid's philosophy. Useful to both advanced students and faculty. Includes helpful Bibliography and links to related entries.)

Norton, D.F., S.F. Barker and T. Beauchamp eds. (1976) *Thomas Reid: Critical Interpretations*, Philadelphia, PA: Philosophical Monographs. (An important early collection of papers on various aspects of Reid's philosophy. Includes 'An Abstract of the Inquiry into the Human Mind on the principles of Common Sense' by Reid, which subsequently appeared in Reid 1764/1997.)

Roeser, S. (2010) *Reid on Ethics*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan. (Thirteen original papers on various aspects of Reid's ethical theory, including moral epistemology, the role of emotions, moral agency, and practical ethics.)

Rowe, W.L. (1991) *Thomas Reid on Freedom and Morality*, Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press. (A careful and clear critical discussion of Reid's views on decision, free action, causation and motivation, including comparison with those Locke, Collins, and Clarke.)

Rysiew, P. ed. (2015) *New Essays on Thomas Reid*, London and New York: Routledge (A collection of new essays on various aspects of Reid's philosophy, including perception, moral theory, epistemology, mind, language, and metaphysics.)

Van Cleve, J. (2015) *Problems from Reid*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. (An in-depth critical examination of Reid's views on a whole range of topics and issues, including epistemology, perception, the geometry of visibles, causation, agency, freedom, and morals.)

Wolterstorff, N. (2001) *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Focuses on Reid's rejection of the theory of ideas, his theory of perception and his epistemology, emphasizing the "ungrounded trust" that is at the heart of the latter.)

Yaffe, G. (2007) *Manifest Activity: Thomas Reid's Theory of Action*. Oxford University Press. (Critical evaluation of Reid's views on human power, the will, intentional action, and the place of our agency in the natural world.)