

our freedom. Despite their new orientation, the debate remained stalled because, Harris suggests, there was “profound disagreement about what exactly it meant . . . ‘to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects’.”

What makes this a good book are its interesting and provocative discussions of Hume and Reid. Harris sees Hume’s treatment as more revolutionary than most, arguing that it rests on a “contentious” understanding of the copy principle that all simple ideas are copies of impressions—although it does not follow from my being unable to identify an idea’s aboriginal impression that the resulting idea is incoherent. And regarding Reid, Harris finds parallels between his common-sense commitments to libertarianism and the possibility of knowledge that suggest his critique of the way of ideas is inadequate without a full defense of libertarianism.

To be a great book, however, Harris should have engaged the secondary literature more and shown why his interpretations are preferable to the alternatives. He clearly knows the literature and has something to say about it, but his comments are buried in footnotes and tend to be passing notices of differences rather efforts to engage the contrary arguments. The biggest flaw, however, is the book’s failure to demonstrate the impact of the rise of experimentalism, a thesis that looks strained when applied to thinkers after Reid. James Gregory, for example, rejects the experimentalist’s “direct appeals to [our] consciousness” of willing for deciding the issue in favor of *a priori* arguments, and against the necessitarian’s conception of human agency and causation as constant conjunction. So too, Alexander Crombie defends necessitarianism by postulating that many of our motives are unconscious, contrary to Reid’s experimentalist appeals to motiveless activity. Moreover, there are several thinkers, often though not always necessitarian (e.g., Richard Price and James Oswald in their arguments from moral responsibility), who utilize speculative theses in their analyses of the experience of willing, which makes one wonder about their commitment to experimentalism. Part of the problem is the way Harris focuses on simply laying out how each thinker responded to the debate rather than digging out the underlying motivations for their positions and connecting those to a more general commitment to experimentalism. But another part of the problem is surely the obscurity of exactly what “experimentalism” is. The idea of being “faithful” to our experiences of willing is vague enough as to apply to virtually everyone (Kames excepted), but something much sharper is required if it is to serve as the basis for an interpretive hypothesis. The project would have benefited from deeper analysis of what experimentalism meant for all of the figures studied, as well as what it *should* have meant, and how this vagueness divided them in the end.

Despite all this, Harris’s book provides a solid foundation for future scholarship and is well worth reading.

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Ryan Nichols. *Thomas Reid’s Theory of Perception*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007. Pp. xvi + 301. Cloth, \$74.00.

Thanks in no small part to the recognition afforded it by such established figures as William Alston, Keith Lehrer, Alvin Plantinga, and others, Thomas Reid’s (1710–96) philosophy is, at long last, getting the serious attention that it deserves. Ryan Nichols is among the generation of younger scholars who are making Reid’s work a focus of their research, and he has written an excellent book examining Reid’s views on perception.

Previous treatments have been either in articles or part of a larger discussion of Reid’s philosophy as a whole or, more often perhaps, of his epistemological views. The focus on Reid’s epistemology is understandable since what inspired him was the unacceptably *skeptical* implications of the inherited “theory of ideas”—i.e., the view that the immediate object of thought is always some mind-dependent object, as opposed to worldly objects and properties. But if one is to reject the picture of perception that is part-and-parcel of “the

ideal theory,” one needs something to put in its place. And perception is both *the* topic of Reid’s *Inquiry into the Human Mind* (1764) and thoroughly discussed in his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers* (1785). So Reid’s theory of perception merits serious attention, and in this book it receives just that; with consideration given to: Reid’s method; the role of sensation in perception and the sense in which they are/are not perceptual-cognitive objects; Reid’s difficult discussion of “visible figure”; our conceptions of primary and secondary qualities, as well as Reid’s novel take on that distinction; Reid’s response(s) to the Molyneux problem; his provocative and, at times, conflicting claims about “acquired perception”; and whether or in what sense(s) Reid takes perception, in its different forms, to be “direct.”

In discussing these matters, Nichols faces the challenge of connecting Reid’s views with current debates and concepts without being Procrustean or objectionably anachronistic. On both counts he does a fine job. Many of the more involved matters are reserved for footnotes, and faced with a choice between maintaining traction on what Reid actually says and gaining a friction-free “Reidian answer” to certain current philosophical debates (210), Nichols consistently opts for the former. Through it all, Nichols exhibits an excellent grasp of the relevant texts, including those which are less well known (e.g., the *Philosophical Orations*) and several unpublished sources.

One place where I think Nichols goes astray, however, is over the interpretation of passages like the following, in which Reid emphasizes the “unaccountability” of various aspects of the mind and its operations: “For anything we can discover, we might have been so framed as to have all the sensations we now have by our senses, without any impression upon our organs, and without any conception of any external object. For anything we know, we might have been so made as to perceive external objects, without any impressions on bodily organs, and without any of those sensations which invariably accompany perception in our present frame”; and, “We know that such is our constitution, that in certain circumstances we have certain conceptions; but how they are produced we know no more than how we ourselves are produced” (218). As Nichols sees it, the “philosophical pessimism” expressed in such passages makes it clear “why Reid does not claim in print to possess perceptual knowledge of external objects, as opposed to ‘informations of the sense’”; indeed, he says, “Reid is reluctant to allow knowledge even that external objects produce our conceptions of what seem to us to be external objects” (ibid.).

While the above passages—like Reid’s remarks on perceptual error (219–22)—may be a corrective to glib attributions of doctrines of direct perception and direct perceptual knowledge to Reid, Nichols’ interpretation of them has Reid seriously entertaining some kind of “perceptual skepticism” (218). Yet, Reid’s view seems to be that “the perception of external objects by our senses” is pleonastic (see Hamilton edition of Reid’s *Works*, 222a–b), and in the same chapter of the *Essays* he calls perception a “source of our knowledge” (326a) and says that “if the word axiom be put to signify every truth which is known immediately, without being deduced from any antecedent truth, then the existence of the objects of sense may be called an axiom” (329a). Such claims motivate an alternative reading of the passages in question.

While a tip of one’s hat to Newtonian methodology was common in Reid’s time, the author makes clear that Reid saw others as having failed to avoid indulging in “hypotheses.” (Passages like the foregoing almost always occur, as these do, in Reid’s discussions of this or that failed attempt to explain how the mind works.) Arguably, it is the need for a countervailing theoretical modesty that Reid seems to be emphasizing. As the possibility of perception without sensation or even without impressions on “the organs of sense” suggests, there is a certain arbitrariness to our manner of perceiving objects. And while we may have no doubt that perception gives us “immediate knowledge” of material things and attempt, as Reid does, a careful “anatomy” of the relevant “powers and principles” of the mind (98a), we are still far from understanding how it all works.

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