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## BOOK REVIEW

### *Thomas Reid's Theory of Perception*

Ryan Nichols

Clarendon Press, 2007. xvi + 302 pp. £40.00

REVIEWED BY

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In *Thomas Reid's Theory of Perception*, Ryan Nichols presents an interpretation and critique of the views of one of the most interesting thinkers of the early modern period, in particular, as the title indicates, those relating to perception. The book covers Reid's Newtonian method, perception through touch and vision, the intentionality of perceptual states, the role of sensations in perception, perception of primary and secondary qualities, and the unity of perception via a discussion of Molyneux's question regarding the perceptual abilities of one with recently acquired sight. Nichols's book is somewhat challenging, more suitable to someone who is familiar with Reid's theory of perception and ongoing debates in the secondary literature than to someone who is just looking to find out about Reid's views. As Nichols notes, Reid's own writing is very clear and there's no reason to think that Reid was less than forthcoming about his views (p. 1). While Nichols claims to interpret and critique Reid's views, I would have appreciated more indication of overarching themes, or guidance as to where the discussions were going. Fortunately, the efforts necessary to work through Nichols's text are paid off by some very interesting and valuable discussions, particularly the sections on direct realism, acquired perceptions, and Molyneux's Question. Rather than

summarize and give further praise to those sections, I'll turn my attention to those sections I found more problematic. In what follows, I'll take issue with Nichols's discussion of Reid's 'Blind Book' argument, visible figure, and the primary quality/secondary quality distinction.

In Chapter 2, Nichols discusses Reid's ideas about intentional awareness, an element of perception, elsewhere called 'conceptual awareness', 'conception' or 'apprehension', characterized as an object-oriented mental state, or a conscious state that is about something (p. 43). Here, Nichols argues that Reid shows that intentionality is irreducible with his 'Blind Book' argument against the Theory of Ideas. Like the subject in Searle's Chinese room, Reid imagines an illiterate savage examining a book. Not only would he not know if there was anything in the world that corresponded to the marks in the book, the savage wouldn't know that the marks meant anything. According to Reid, as Nichols interprets him, if the Theory of Ideas were true, we would be in a similar position with respect to our own mental states: we wouldn't know what, if anything, our states represent.

I find this argument somewhat confusing. The expression 'what my mental states represent' seems ambiguous to me. It can mean the actual mind-independent state of affairs in the external world that my mental states are about, or it can mean the way my mental states represent the world as being, which may or may not be the case. Now, if the immediate objects of my perception are just my own ideas, I can see why that would lead me to wonder whether there are any mind-independent objects in the world corresponding to those ideas. However, it is not clear to me why supposing that the immediate objects of my perception are my own ideas would lead me to think that I don't know how my mental states represent the world as being—that I don't know how the world seems to me. For example, suppose I have a visual experience of something red. It's a datum of introspection that, given that experience, the world would seem to me to have something red in it. If the Theory of Ideas is right, I might have cause to be skeptical about whether there is a mind-independent red object in my environment. However, I don't see why that should lead me to say that I don't know that my experience represents the world as having something red in it. Perhaps the analogy to the illiterate savage is supposed to show that my visual experience of something red stands in no better relation to a belief that there's a red thing in my environment than

squiggles on a page stand to a belief in some possible object that the squiggles describe in some language that I don't understand. But I'm not sure why I'm supposed to think that the analogy is still holding up at this point.

In Chapter 4, Nichols explores Reid's thoughts about visual perception, particularly 'visible figure'—roughly the two-dimensional shape an object seems to have from the observer's perspective. When I see a tabletop from across the room, while its real figure is rectangular, its apparent visible figure is trapezoidal. Reid's claim that visible figures are immediate objects of visual perception puts his view at odds with his own rejection of the perceptual intermediaries of the Theory of Ideas. Nichols tries to extricate Reid from this conundrum by arguing that a visible figure is not like an idea but is instead a mind-independent relational property—a relation between an object and an eye (just one eye, because 'the geometry of the visibles' is calculated for monocular vision). Furthermore, Nichols says visible figures are mind-independent because they are independent of particular visual systems. If you stand exactly where I stood in front of the tabletop, positioning one eye in the same place where one of my eyes was, there would be the "same seen figure" (p. 122).

While I appreciate the effort to solve the mystery of the ontological status of visible figures, I have some worries about Nichols's suggestion. First of all, it's not clear how Nichols is thinking about identity conditions for relations. Two different pairs of individuals could presumably stand in the same *type* of relation: two couples could instantiate the same relation, 'being married'. However, it seems that two different pairs of individuals could not stand in the same *token* relation, and if one of the relata change, there's a different token relation. So, if Sam divorces Suzy and marries Pam, while Sam stands in the same type of relation to Pam as he stood to Suzy, there's a clear sense in which Sam is not in the same marriage. So, the relation that my eye has to the tabletop is not the same token relation that your eye does. I don't know if the token relation is independent of my mind, but it's not independent of my eye.

What's more problematic is that thinking of visible figure as a relational property doesn't cohere well with other things that are said about it (p. 113). Visible figure is said to be capable of being represented by a figure cast upon the inner surface of a sphere, but it's not

clear that the relation between an object and my eye is capable of being represented in that way. Visible figure is something of which we can be perceptually aware, but it seems as if what we are aware of in those instances is a figure, not a relation. I don't know what it means to say that my eye stands in the 'visible figure' relation to the tabletop. Perhaps the visible figure relation incorporates spatial relations. But Nichols attributes to Reid the view that one can perceive a visible figure without perceiving the distance between one's eye and the perceived object (p. 122). He attributes to Reid the view that real figure is derivable from visible figure plus distance and position (p. 114), but if visible figure incorporates the spatial relation between the eye and the object, one would be able to derive real figure from visible figure alone. If visible figure is a *non-spatial* relation between an object and an eye, the nature of this property is still mysterious to me.

Chapter 5 concerns perception of primary and secondary qualities. Traditionally, the distinction between these qualities is roughly that primary qualities such as shape, size, and motion are in some sense objective, observer-independent features of the world, while secondary qualities, such as color, smell, taste, and sound, are more closely tied to our particular human perceptual perspective. According to Nichols, Reid departs from this tradition by construing the distinction as a conceptual one, rather than a metaphysical one. Concepts of primary qualities are clear and distinct, while concepts of secondary qualities are merely concepts of unknown causes of sensations. Nichols addresses the question of whether 'secondary quality' refers to the sensation caused, the disposition to cause the sensation, or the physical cause of the sensation (the causal base). Based on plausible textual evidence, he settles on the third of these options.

Nichols rejects claims that Reid holds a view that Nichols calls both 'dispositionalism' and 'the identity thesis'. However, it's not clear just what is being rejected. There's no consensus on use of the term 'dispositionalism', and the content of an identity thesis is only as clear as the specification of what is being identified with what. Nichols claims that Reid does not identify dispositions to cause sensations with their causal bases, but Nichols does not call this claim "the identity thesis" (p. 172). Instead, Nichols says that 'dispositionalism' identifies a secondary quality with a set of counterfactual conditions (p. 173). But it's not clear that anyone ever held, or attributed to Reid, the view that a quality, such as redness, is a set of counterfactual conditions.

Nichols goes on to say that the ‘the identity thesis’ identifies a secondary quality with the property that fulfils a set of counterfactual conditions having to do with how agents would respond to certain physical properties. For example, if I were in the presence of an aromatic rose, I would experience a certain olfactory sensation. In this case, according to ‘the identity thesis’, the secondary property is whatever property is such that, if it were present to me, in normal conditions, I would experience a certain sensation. It seems to me that the property that fulfils this counterfactual condition is the physical cause of my sensation—the causal basis. If this is right, then what Nichols calls ‘the identity thesis’ identifies the secondary quality with a *causal basis*. And, if this is right, then Nichols’s claims that Reid rejects ‘the identity thesis’, and that he holds that secondary qualities are the physical properties that cause sensations are clearly inconsistent. If this is wrong, I wonder which property Nichols thinks fulfils the counterfactual conditions, if not the causal basis.

Elsewhere, Nichols uses ‘dispositionalism’ for the view which identifies secondary qualities with *dispositions* to cause sensations (p. 173). He goes on to claim that Reid’s remarks that colors are qualities in bodies and not sensations amount to a denial of the identity thesis (p. 176). But this would only make sense if ‘the identity thesis’ identifies the secondary quality with the *sensation*. Secondary qualities being qualities in bodies and not sensations is consistent with identifying secondary qualities with causal bases, secondary qualities with dispositions, or dispositions with causal bases. In the end, I’m not sure what ‘the identity thesis’ is supposed to be, or why Nichols declines to attribute some identity thesis to Reid. The claim that such a thesis would be too metaphysical for Reid is at odds with Nichols’s claim that Reid identifies secondary qualities with the physical causes of sensations.