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THOMAS REID'S COMMON SENSE
PHILOSOPHY OF MIND*Todd Buras***1. Reid's project**

Thomas Reid's philosophy is a philosophy of mind. The aim of his published works is to construct what he calls "a just system of the mind; that is, an enumeration of the original powers and laws of our constitution, and an explication from them of the various phenomena of human nature" (IHM I ii, 15).

In Reid's day, the "phenomena of human nature" to be explicated in the philosophy of mind were wide-ranging. "Pneumatology," as the field was then known (EIP, 12), included "the Philosophy of the Mind and the Sciences that depend on it." Reid was introduced to the subject in Aberdeen, where the subject was defined as follows:

By the Philosophy of the Mind is Understood, An Account of the constitution of the Human Mind, and of All its powers and Faculties, whether Sensitive, Intellectual or Moral; the Improvements they are capable of, and the Means of their Improvement; the Mutual Influences of Body and Mind on each Other; and of the knowledge we may acquire of Other Minds and Particularly the Supreme Mind. And the Sciences depending on the Philosophy of Mind, Are, Understood to be Logic, Rhetorick, The Laws of Nature and Nations, Politicks, Oeconomicks, the fine Arts and Natural Religion.¹

Because the subject was conceived in such expansive terms, Reid's works include much that would not be considered philosophy of mind today (e.g., epistemology, aesthetics, moral theory, and natural theology). But, as we shall see, Reid's own contributions to the field focused on foundational issues, many of which remain at the heart of what is now recognized as philosophy of mind.

At the most general level, the issue that drew Reid's attention is what he describes in one passage as "the correspondence . . . between the thinking principle within us and the material world without us" (EIP II vii, 104). The correspondence has two focal points: "Experience teaches us, that certain impressions upon

the body are constantly followed by certain sensations of the mind; and that, on the other hand, certain determinations of the mind are constantly followed by certain motions in the body” (IHM VI xxi, 176). The correspondence between bodily impressions and sensations yields perception; the connection between mental determinations and bodily motions issues in agency. In perception and agency the mind interfaces with the world; the mind gets in touch with the world, both to receive information about the states of the world, and to exercise influence over those states. These topics, perception and agency, are the central focus of Reid’s published works. Sense perception is the focus of Reid’s *Inquiry in the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764) and the centerpiece of his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785); agency is the principle subject of *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (1788).

2. Reid’s methods

Reid’s goal in addressing these topics is to construct a *just* system of the mind. The standards of justice applied to philosophical systems are always as important, and often as controversial, as the theories themselves. This is especially true in Reid’s case.² The title of his first major work, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, signals a distinctive approach. Reid’s understanding of common sense and its role in philosophy decisively shapes the system he constructs as well as the critique he mounts against his rivals.

Reid’s methodological commitments are rooted in a sense of continuity between philosophy and the concerns of common life. Like many in his day, Reid characterized his methods as simply an extension into the philosophy of mind of the methods that led to Newton’s exemplary system of the material world. But Reid also emphasized the continuity between Newton’s *regulae philosophandi* and the “procedure of understanding . . . familiar to every human creature in the common affairs of life.” He says Newton’s methodological principles simply “are maxims of common sense, and are practiced every day in common life” (IHM I ii, 12).

The concerns of common life are not only the root of the proper principles of reasoning in philosophy; they also give philosophy its central concerns, and implicitly constrain acceptable theories. Reid’s central topics are mental phenomena with which everyone is perfectly familiar and which everyone may form a distinct conception by attentive observation (EIP I i, 19–20; IHM I ii, 15 and VII, 203). The point of his philosophy is to explain phenomena featured in everyday life, to illumine concepts (like perception and agency) that are rooted in that context.

Just philosophical systems therefore show high regard for the phenomena they are enlisted to explain. Reid is comfortable at crucial junctures pressing “the facts” against theories that contravene them, saying that “to argue theory against fact is contrary to the rules of true philosophy” (IHM V viii, 76). He similarly resists any theory that “warps” ordinary thinking (EIP I i, 36) or “strains phenomena to make them tally with it and make it look like the work of Nature” (EIP VI vii, 535). As

a result, his methodology is generally inhospitable to revisionary philosophy – philosophy that denies the phenomena of ordinary life, explains it away, or radically reinterprets it. Reid cites Zeno’s arguments against the reality of motion as an example of this sort of problematic revisionism (IHM I vi, 21). A philosophy maintaining that there is no such thing as motion may be an interesting formal exercise, and it may highlight the deficiencies in our thinking, but it is no good for understanding the concepts of motion embedded in ordinary life.

From Reid’s point of view, revisionary philosophy mistakes its purpose and, in its confusion, violates the terms of its implicit charter. Reid therefore describes such philosophy as overstepping its bounds (IHM I v, 19), and as objectionably bold:

It is a bold philosophy that rejects, without ceremony, principles which irresistibly govern the belief and the conduct of all mankind in the common concerns of life; and to which the philosopher himself must yield, after he imagines he hath confuted them. Such principles are older and of more authority than Philosophy: she rests upon them as her basis, not they upon her.

(IHM I vi, 21)

As this remark indicates, Reid is not just voicing a generic commitment to “save the phenomena.” Reid is generally respectful of pre-theoretical conviction, but he is especially concerned about the boldness of philosophy vis-à-vis a unique class of pre-theoretical beliefs: those that are both irresistible (i.e., even the philosopher who refutes them must yield to them), and deeply embedded in the structure of ordinary life (i.e., govern all human conduct). Further, Reid does not protest any and all philosophical opposition to such beliefs; he complains rather about the rejection of such beliefs “without ceremony.”

Beliefs taken for granted in the common concerns of life and imposed on us by the constitution of our nature are what Reid calls the principles of common sense (IHM II vi, 33). He never attempts to compile an exhaustive list of such beliefs. He simply lists examples, including belief in other minds and the basic reliability of our faculties (EIP VI 5, 470–490). While opposition between theory and fact generally weighs against the theory and not the fact, opposition between philosophy and the principles of common sense is more problematic. From Reid’s point of view, such opposition is not just evidence that the theory is false, but that it is methodologically unsound. It is a mistake to expect a standard philosophical defense of the principles of common sense, since there are no more basic beliefs to which a philosopher may appeal in support of them. Yet in a very literal sense, beliefs opposed to the principles of common sense are incredible. What is contrary to them Reid flatly calls “absurd” (IHM II vi, 33). In light of the hold the principles of common sense have on our belief, he thinks it is wiser to “make a virtue of necessity.” Rather than opposing beliefs we can neither defend nor

suppress, a just philosophical system will reconcile “our reason to [them] as best we can” (IHM V vii, 69).

Despite Reid’s dramatic pledges of allegiance to the principles of common sense (e.g., IHM I v, 18; IHM II viii, 39), he does not appeal to these beliefs simply to settle substantive philosophical debate. He is well aware of the way substantive philosophical controversies can be translated into disputes about whether a belief is a principle of common sense, or about the content of any belief that obviously is. He does “not pretend that those things which are laid down as first principles may not be examined, and that we ought not to have our ears open to what may be pleaded against their being admitted as such” (IHM I ii, 44). This is because,

It is not impossible that what is only a vulgar prejudice may be mistaken for a first principle. Nor is it impossible, that what is really a first principle may, by the enchantment of words, have such a mist thrown about it, as to hide its evidence, and to make a man of candor doubt it.

(EIP I ii, 41)

The point of Reid’s appeal to the principles of common sense is rather to establish a high burden of proof on any philosophy that would contravene these principles. “I resolve for my own part always to pay great regard to the dictates of common sense, and not to depart from them *without absolute necessity*” (*Inq* II viii, 39, emphasis added). A just philosophy may indeed challenge and overturn such principles, but it will not cast such principles aside unceremoniously.

The sort of ceremony Reid has in mind has two key components. The ceremony begins with the presentation of good arguments for the philosophical doctrines that generate the conflicts. A good argument, in this context, must be independent of the explanatory power of the philosophical doctrines vis-à-vis some phenomena. Carrying the banner of Newton’s methods into the human sciences requires nothing less. Reid quotes the first of Newton’s *regulae philosophi* to justify the demand: “No more causes, nor any other causes of natural effects ought to be admitted, but such as are both true, and are sufficient for explaining their appearances” (EIP I iii, 51; see also AC, 188). The key phrase is “both true.” Explanatorily equivalent hypotheses are too easy to come by. To merit serious consideration, a philosophical account of phenomena must not only explain the phenomena; it must be accompanied by independent evidence that the hypothesized cause really exists. Philosophical accounts of phenomena that lack independent evidence are for Reid mere conjectures, theories or hypotheses. He banishes them from a just system of the mind – all the more so if they generate conflict with the principles of common sense (IHM I ii, 12; EIP I iii, 50).

The second component of a ceremonious challenge to the principles of common sense is the construction of a compelling error theory. Reid does not treat even the unanimous consent of all ages and nations as indefeasible support for a principle of common sense. Rather, he merely insists that those who would

reject such consent “show some prejudice, as universal as that consent is, which might be the cause of it” (EIP I ii, 45). He elaborates:

A Philosopher is, no doubt, entitled to examine even those distinctions that are to be found in the structure of all languages; and if he is able to show that there is no foundation for them in the nature of the things distinguished; if he can point out some prejudice common to mankind which has led them to distinguish things that are not really different; in that case, such a distinction may be imputed to a vulgar error, which ought to be corrected in philosophy.

(EIP I i, 27)

Requiring this sort of error theory is a way of paying homage to the authority of common sense, even while challenging its alleged deliverances. “When we come to be instructed by Philosophers,” Reid explains, “we must bring the old light of common sense along with us, and by it judge the new light which the Philosopher communicates to us.” A philosopher who expects us simply to extinguish the light of common sense in order to embrace a theory misunderstands the continuity between philosophical theorizing and the concerns of common life.³

3. Reid’s dualistic framework

Before Reid published his *Inquiry*, an intermediary (Hugh Blair) shared a sample of the text with Hume, soliciting Hume’s judgment of the performance.⁴ Among several other incisive comments, Hume criticizes the organization and presentation of Reid’s philosophy. He says wryly, “there seems to be some Defect in Method; at least, I do not find the subject open up gradually, and one part throwing light upon another: . . . for instance, under the Article of Smelling, he gives you a glimpse of all the depths of his philosophy” (IHM, 256).

In keeping with his commitment to careful inner observation and just induction from observed facts, Reid’s *Inquiry* indeed unfolds sense by sense. In defense of his presentation, Reid says,

I thought it most decent and proper to write not in the synthetical but in the analytical method: that is, not to lay down my conclusions first and then seek for facts to confirm them; but to take the facts in the order that the senses present them and consider what may be inferred from them.

(IHM, 262)

Reid attributes major errors in philosophy to the willingness of philosophers to begin with theoretical principles and adduce facts that confirm or comport with that account (IHM I i, 12; EIP I iii, 48–51). Even in Reid’s much later *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, he does not systematically repackage his “system of the

mind.” The *Essays* serve rather to contextualize Reid’s account of the senses in a broader account of our basic mental powers; it too unfolds faculty by faculty.

Reid’s philosophy of mind is thus presented in the form of a compendium of analyses of specific mental phenomena.⁵ His account of each of the phenomena (e.g., memory, perception, taste) comes to rest on original principles of our constitution. But he never even attempts an exhaustive enumeration of the principles employed by his account of the mind, much less a careful study of their interrelations and lines of support.⁶ He acknowledges the usefulness of systematization (e.g., EIP VI iv, 457), but obviously takes the task to be downstream from his central concerns. His work is thus a sort of prolegomena to a “just system of the mind.” In his response to Hume’s jab, Reid characterizes his contribution as fairly and distinctly taking down the testimony of the witnesses (i.e., our faculties) before summing up the evidence and drawing any conclusions about the nature of our minds (IHM, 262).

Identifying Reid’s most basic commitments in the philosophy of mind and reconstructing his defense of these starting points thus requires interpretation, and the interpretation required is a larger project than can be undertaken here. For the purposes of understanding Reid’s account of the “correspondence between the thinking principle within and the material world without us,” one point bears special emphasis – call it *the difference thesis*.

The reliability of our basic sources of information about the “thinking principle within” and the “external world without” is a starting point for Reid (EIP VI v, 470, 476, 480). We have no rational alternative to believing that the things of which we are made aware by these faculties both exist and are (at least roughly) as we believe them to be. Attending carefully to what our faculties teach in each domain leads Reid to the difference thesis. “Total dissimilitude” is Reid’s repeated assessment of the phenomena we encounter through consciousness and the external senses (IHM V ii, 57; IHM V vii, 69; EIP II xvii, 203). In the Abstract of the *Inquiry* that Reid prepared for Hume’s use, he describes the dissimilarity between mind and matter as “the foundation of my system” (IHM, 259); and in the main text he warns against the errors of presuming any significant commonality between the two (IHM VII, 203).

The reasoning behind the difference thesis is simple: our senses inform us of objects characterized by features like extension, motion, and hardness. The objects of consciousness, by contrast, include thoughts and feelings. The two sorts of things are as different as two things can be (IHM V v, 64), as different, Reid says, “as pain and the point of a sword” (IHM V v, 69), or a toothache and a triangle (IHM V viii, 74). He explains:

I have as clear a conception of extension, hardness, and motion, as I have of the point of a sword; and, with some pains and practice, I can form as clear a notion of the other sensations of touch, as I have of pain. When I do so, and compare them together, it appears to me clear as daylight

that the former are not of kin to the latter, nor resemble them in any one feature.

(IHM V vii, 69)

Elsewhere he emphasizes the difference by contrasting the implications of the two sorts of objects. Speaking specifically of the difference between tactile sensations and hardness, he says:

One is a sensation of the mind, which can have no existence but in a sentient being; nor can it exist one moment longer than it is felt; the other is in the table, and we conclude without any difficulty, that it was in the table before it was felt, and continues after the felling is over. The one implies no kind of extension, nor parts, nor cohesion; the other implies all these.

(IHM V v, 64)

The difference thesis means, for Reid, that there is a “vast interval” between the two great subjects of human knowledge, which he calls “the material world” and the “intellectual world” (EIP, 11). The two domains are conceptually independent: “[No one can] show, by any good argument, that all our sensations might not have been as they are, though no body, nor quality of body, had ever existed” (IHM V ii, 5); and “We perceive not any necessary connection between the volition and exertion on our part, and the motion of our body that follows them” (EAP I vii, 40). Because our concepts of mind and matter are grounded in natural beliefs, and because we have no rational alternative but to trust our natural beliefs, the conceptual independence of mind and matter leads straightway to ontological independence, i.e., dualism.

Reid unapologetically endorses the dualism that follows in his system from the difference thesis, both early and late in his career (IHM VII, 217; EIP II x, 89). And the differences he identifies form the basis of respectable arguments for a real distinction between mental states and physical states. Things that share no common properties are not identical; indeed, one difference in properties is enough to establish distinction. If any bit of matter can exist when it is not perceived, but no mental state can, then, by Leibniz’s law, no mental state is a bit of matter. If no mental state can exist without belonging to a subject, but any bit of matter can, then, again, no bit of matter is a mental state.

Reid himself shows only occasional interest in such arguments. In an unpublished appendix to his lectures on pneumatology, he references favorably Samuel Clarke’s argument from the indivisibility of ideas, feelings, and thoughts, and the divisibility of everything material (EIP, 619). In an unpublished discourse examining the materialism of Joseph Priestly, Reid not only elaborates further on Clarke’s argument (AC, 230–231), he constructs an extended *a fortiori* argument of his own. He endeavors to remove all doubt as to whether human beings are endowed with “an immaterial principle” by showing that “the meanest animals

and even vegetables” are so endowed (AC, 230). The reasoning proceeds from the special sort of unity belonging to everything that has life (AC 223–225). He asks whether there is any difference between animate and inanimate matter above the organization of parts. He reasons that animate matter has a sort of unity that inanimate matter lacks:

A piece of dead matter is from its nature made up of parts and divisible into parts which may not only be separately conceived, but really have a separate existence so that one part may be annihilated without affecting the remaining parts.

(AC 224)

Animate matter, by contrast, is united “into one being,” and the dissolution of some parts does not leave the others unaffected.

While Reid’s unpublished manuscripts show some interest in constructing direct arguments for his dualism (and these arguments deserve more attention than they have yet received), his published works focus instead on defending the content and reliability of our natural beliefs about mind and body. If our natural beliefs are reliable guides to reality, and if they characterize mind and body in fundamentally different terms, it follows both that there really are minds and bodies and that they are really different. Reid’s published works thus constitute a sort of semantic argument for the central tenets of dualism, an argument from the truth conditions of our natural beliefs.

In Reid’s day, threats to the reliability and content of our natural beliefs were grounded in theories about the basic powers of the human mind, specifically as these powers pertained to perception and agency. Reid’s immediate task is therefore to refute theories of perception and agency that support the denial of the difference thesis. On the constructive side, his project is to sketch at least the basic outlines of an account of “the correspondence . . . between the thinking principle within us and the material world without us” that does not deny the difference thesis – an account that, as he says, neither spiritualizes bodies nor materializes mind (IHM VII, 210). Reid’s project thus leads him headlong into the problems (i.e., agency and perception) that plagued dualistic philosophy of mind from the beginning. In his exchange with Hume, Reid avowed himself Hume’s disciple in metaphysics (IHM, 264). But in truth his work is a contribution to a broadly Cartesian philosophy of mind, a contribution informed by the rise idealistic and materialistic alternatives in the 18th century.⁷

4. Reid on perception

Reid believed that the philosophers of his day had been led to spiritualize body by a failed account of perception. The account of perception resulted from the application of a broader theory of the human understanding, which Reid called the theory of ideas. According to this theory, the only immediate objects of thought are things that presently exist in the mind itself, usually called ideas. It follows from

this starting point that anything not presently existing in the mind itself is either not an object of thought at all or else is an object of thought through the mediation of ideas. The traditional concerns of ordinary life and philosophy include a number of things that do not presently exist in the mind itself – things that do not exist presently at all (i.e., the past), or do not exist only in the present (i.e., the self), or do not exist in the mind at all (e.g., external objects), or do not exist in one’s own mind (e.g., other minds). On the theory of ideas, the fate of all such things turns on the mediating power of our ideas. What ideas we have and what they are able to represent thus become crucial issues. For what cannot be thought through the mediation of ideas cannot be thought at all, and what cannot be thought is not an object of belief or knowledge.

The theory takes a profoundly skeptical turn when it is coupled with common empiricist principles about our stock of ideas and their representative power. Hume’s copy principle is the clearest example. The principle maintains that all our ideas are copied from things that presently exist in the mind itself (which he calls impressions). Whatever else the copy relation entails, it clearly implies a high degree of similarity to the original. It follows that all our ideas are like things that presently exist in the mind itself. Now it was taken for granted in the context that ideas represent things by resembling them. It follows that what is not in some degree like an idea cannot be represented by an idea. In the context of the difference thesis, the result is what John Greco (2004) calls *conceptual skepticism* about the external world: the sort of thing material objects are supposed to be are completely beyond the reach of our cognitive capacities. Since material things do not presently exist in the mind, they are not immediate objects of thought. Since they are, in Hume’s words, “specifically different” from what does exist in the mind itself, they are not mediated objects of thought either. Reid summarizes the conclusion as follows:

We can have no conception of an inanimate substance, such as matter is conceived to be, or of any of its qualities; and there is the strongest ground to believe that there is no existence in nature but minds, sensations, and ideas: If there is any other kind of existences, it must be what we neither have nor can have any conception of.

(IHM V viii, 74)

On the theory of ideas, then, material things are beyond the reach of our cognitive powers and outside the scope of all our knowledge. So the world we know through our senses cannot be a world of mind-independent objects. What then is it? It is at this point that the theory has a tendency to “spiritualize body.” What is left in matter’s place, as Reid says above, is nothing but mind, sensations, and ideas. The world we know through the senses must in some way reduce to such things. Through a process Reid describes as “metaphysical sublimation” (IHM VII, 210), conceptual skeptics turn toward idealism, identifying the objects of perception (e.g., apples and trees) with features of perceiving minds and their perceptions. If the objects of sense experience and knowledge are in some way

identified with perceiving minds and their contents, the problem of explaining the correlation between perceptual states and the objects of sense evaporates. But the objects of sense are not mind-independent, and perception is not a source of knowledge of something fundamentally different from our own perceptual states.

Reid resists this conclusion on basically methodological grounds. Conceptual skepticism and idealism are bold philosophies, pitting themselves against the dictates of common sense. What is worse, the whole line of reasoning began with a hypothesis for which no adequate evidence is given. By Reid's lights, it is more reasonable to call the troublesome theory in question, however common it may be, than to "discard the material world, and by that means expose philosophy to the ridicule of all men, who will not offer up common sense as a sacrifice to metaphysics" (IHM V viii, 75). Nor is it at all difficult to find grounds (other than idealistic implications) to reject the theory. The theory relies on the claim that all our ideas are copied from, and therefore like, things that presently exist in the mind itself. A single example of an idea that cannot be copied from sensations refutes the theory.⁸ The argument Reid considers the centerpiece of his *Inquiry* – he calls the argument his *experimentum crucis* – presses this sort of strategy against the theory of ideas (IHM V vii, 70).⁹

Rather than starting with a theory about what ideas we have, Reid starts with careful reflection. In perception, he notices, that we deploy two very different sorts of ideas (he call them conceptions). Reidian perception involves believing in the present existence of a body (EIP II xx, 226). To believe in the present existence of a body requires one to have and deploy a conception of the body or the quality of a body (EIP IV i, 295). To deploy a conception of a body involves both apprehending it and characterizing or describing it. The conceptions deployed in perception either describe their objects in terms of a relation they bear to other things or not. Direct conceptions, in Reid's idiom, are conceptions that present or describe their objects as they are in themselves, and not merely in terms of a relation they bear to something else. Relative conceptions, by contrast, present or describe their objects not as they are in themselves but only in terms of a relation they bear to other things (EAP I i, 9). A relative conception, says Reid, "is, strictly speaking, no notion [i.e., conception] of the thing at all, but only of some relation which it bears to something else" (EIP II xvii, 201).

In tactile perception, Reid believes, the senses give us "a direct and distinct notion [i.e., conception] of the primary qualities, and inform us what they are in themselves." His favorite example is hardness. He characterizes the descriptive content of our conception of hardness as *the cohesion of the parts of a body with more or less force*. This conception does not characterize its object (a quality of bodies) in terms of its relation to our sensations or to anything else. Such a conception is direct; it constitutes an understanding of what the quality is in itself, and not merely how it affects other things.

But of the secondary qualities, our senses give us only a relative and obscure notion. They inform us only, that they are qualities that affect us

in a certain manner, that is, produce in us a certain sensation; but as to what they are in themselves, our senses leave us in the dark.

(EIP II xvii, 201; also IHM 5 iv, 61–62)

Reid's standard example is the smell of a rose, which we conceive of only as "an unknown quality or modification, which is the cause or occasion of a sensation which I know well" (EIP II xvii, 202).

Reid is entirely content to rest his claim about the content of our natural perceptual beliefs on such reflective exercises:¹⁰

Whether our notions [i.e., conceptions] of primary qualities are direct and distinct, those of the secondary relative and obscure, is a matter of fact, of which every man may have certain knowledge by attentive reflection upon them. To this reflection I appeal, as the proper test of what has been advanced.

(IP II 17, 203)

The more important question for him is whether it is possible to copy our direct conceptions of the primary qualities from sensations. In a fascinating thought experiment, he argues that it cannot be done.

The experiment invites defenders of the copy principle to walk through the process of reasoning and reflection on sensations from which our direct conceptions of the primary qualities are allegedly copied. Since the blind share our conceptions of the primary qualities, sight must not be essential to the process. So Reid imagines the subject of the thought experiment to be blind. To distinguish the role of our tactile sensations from the role of any proprioceptive sensations, Reid imagines that the subject's body is, initially, "fixed immovably in one place." Finally, he imagines the subject stricken by "some strange distemper," which robs him altogether of every conception he had obtained by touch, but leaves his faculty of sensation and reason intact. In this condition, Reid imagines giving our subject a series of progressively more complex tactile sensations, and challenges defenders of the copy principle to identify the point at which the subject acquires a direct conception of the primary qualities solely by reasoning and reflecting on sensations. If our conceptions of the primary qualities are copied from sensations, we should be able to imagine, at least in outline, how a subject in this condition could reacquire our conceptions of the primary qualities. If our conceptions cannot be reclaimed in this way, they are not copied from sensation.

Again, the argument merits more analysis than it can receive here. But the core of his reasoning is laid bare at the outset.

Suppose him first to be pricked with a pin; this will, no doubt, give a smart sensation: he feels pain; but what can he infer from it? Nothing surely with regard to the existence or figure of a pin. He can infer nothing from this species of pain, which he may not as well infer from the

gout or sciatica. Common sense may lead him to think that this pain has a cause; but whether this cause is body or spirit, extended or unextended, figured or not figured, he cannot possibly, from any principles he is supposed to have, form the least conjecture. Having had formerly no notion of body or of extension, the prick of a pin can give him none.

(*Inq V 7, 65*)

Reid is not denying that our subject may form a conception of the cause of his sensation. He can form a relative, sensational conception. Knowing that he is not the cause of these feelings, and that they must have a cause, the subject may form the conception of an unknown cause of his known sensations, e.g., *something which occasions such-and-such sharply painful sensations*. But such a conception reveals nothing about what the cause is in itself. Our subject has no way to apprehend the cause of his sensation in terms which make no reference to his sensations; he has no way to conceive the cause of his sensations as a body, i.e., an extended, figured, hard, material thing. To conceive of the cause in these terms our subject must first acquire these direct conceptions, and our subject has only simple feelings, and relative conceptions of their cause. He cannot copy these direct conceptions from his sensations. For any conception copied from sensations relates its object to things that exist in our minds, and our direct conceptions of bodies do not. Nor can he concoct our direct conceptions by combining, comparing, and separating conceptions copied from sensations. For these operations do not allow our subject to generate a way of describing objects that differs fundamentally from the conceptions copied from sensations. In this condition, the subject not only cannot *know* whether the unknown cause of his sensations is a body, he cannot so much as conceive of the unknown cause in such terms.

Reid argues next that a more complex range of tactile sensations cannot fundamentally alter the subject's position with respect to the unknown cause. Reasoning and reflecting on more complex tactile sensations does not reveal anything more about the intrinsic nature of the unknown cause than reasoning and reflecting about the simple case. Such reasoning simply allows us to form more and more complex relative conceptions, i.e., to conceive of the unknown cause as something that occasions a more and more complex set of known sensations. For example, Reid imagines applying a blunt object to the subject's skin with steadily increasing force, until he is bruised. He asks, "What has he got by this, but another sensation, or train of sensations, from which he is able to conclude as little as the former" (*Inq V 7, 68*). Our subject experiences sensations that differ from the first case (the prick of a pin) primarily in terms of their increasing intensity over time. Accordingly, he may now conceive of the cause of his sensations as *something which occasions sensations that vary in intensity*. But this conception is still relative to sensations. For all he can tell it is describing something in a mind. He is no closer to discerning anything about what the cause is in itself, no closer, that is, to forming a direct conception of the cause of his sensations.

On the basis of such considerations, Reid concludes that defenders of the theory of ideas “have imposed upon themselves, and upon us, in pretending to deduce from sensation the first origin of our notions of external existences. . . . The very conception of them is irreconcilable to the [their] principles” (IHM V vii, 67). Having drawn out the tension between the theory and our direct conceptions of the primary qualities, Reid thinks the choice is clear. If the theory is true, then we do not have direct conceptions of the primary qualities. On the other hand, if we have direct conceptions of the primary qualities, then the theory is not true: it is not the case that all our ideas are copied from sensations, and that the content of our natural perceptual beliefs does not include something specifically different from our sensations. The fact that we have direct conceptions of external objects is part of “the phenomena of human nature, from which we may justly argue against any hypothesis, however generally received. But to argue from a hypothesis against facts is contrary to the rules of true philosophy” (IHM V viii, 76).

Reid’s own account of how we come by our direct conceptions of the primary qualities relies on what he calls a “rule in philosophizing” (IHM, 260). He says:

[W]here ever two things are constantly and invariably connected in the course of Nature, and where at the same time this connection cannot be accounted for by any known law of Nature: We ought to consider such connection as being itself a primary Law of Nature, or else a consequence of some law of nature hitherto undiscovered.

In tactile perception, Reid believes, certain sensations of touch are constantly and invariably followed by perceptual states that involve direct conceptions of qualities like hardness. Unless and until the connection can be accounted for by the operation of other principles, it ought to be considered an original principle of our constitution (IHM V ii, 57–58).

Reid is reasoning to the mental parallel of bodily reflexes. In bodily reflexes, involuntary motions follow certain stimuli invariably – e.g., startling. The motions are not explained by other known principles of bodily change (i.e., they are not the result of voluntary action or any known autonomic process). To explain the patterns of bodily change we posit an original principle, i.e., a reflex. Just so, to explain the connection in perception between certain tactile sensations and the deployment of direct conceptions of the primary qualities, Reid relies on the original principles of our constitution. Some reflexes trigger actions we are able to perform independently (e.g., withdrawal); others are the source of changes that we are otherwise unable to make (e.g., pupillary light reflex). Reid emphasizes that the connection between tactile sensations and the deployment of direct conceptions of the primary qualities is more akin to the later sort. The appeal to the principles of our constitution is meant to explain not only the connection between our sensations and conceptions, it is also meant to explain the very fact that we possess the direct conceptions that are connected with sensations in this way (IHM V iii, 59). Reid’s appeal to the original principles of our constitution is thus a form of

nativism.¹¹ The capacity to take mind-independent things as the objects of thought in perception is thus ultimately a gift of nature, a gift discovered in our natural perceptual beliefs about the primary qualities of bodies.

Reid recognized that his account of the content of perceptual belief was not enough on its own to defend the difference thesis from the “spiritualizers.” He also defended the reliability of natural perceptual beliefs. Berkeley and Hume argued famously that, even if we could conceive of something specifically different from our ideas, we could never justify belief in such things.¹² The second stage of Reid’s engagement with the theory of ideas addresses the justification of perceptual beliefs. The story here ventures away from Reid’s philosophy of mind and into his epistemology. So we will not follow this trail.¹³ Suffice it to say that if Reid is right about the reliability of our natural belief about bodies, then, given his account of the content of such beliefs, there are indeed things very different from any thing in our own minds.

5. Reid on Agency

In the *Inquiry* (1764) Reid not only contests the spiritualization of bodies; he mentions the opposite tendency of philosophers to “materialize the mind” (IHM VII, 205). But the later threat is not a pressing issue in the early work. Indeed, in the *Inquiry* he attributes the materializing tendency only to ancient philosophical systems. Because ancient systems do not share the modern conception of matter, Reid shows little concern in the *Inquiry* to identify and resist the reasoning behind the materializers’ rejection of the difference thesis (IHM VII, 206). By the time of Reid’s last published work, *Essays on the Active Powers* (1788), the threat from materialism was a pressing concern for Reid, and hotly debated in his own context.¹⁴ As before, Reid understood the debate to be centered on the content of our natural beliefs, in this case about agency. Where the spiritualizers deflate the content of natural beliefs about bodies, thereby rendering those beliefs consistent with idealism, the materializers deflate the content of our natural beliefs about agency, thereby rendering those beliefs consistent with materialism. Reid saw the same failed theory of the human understanding at the root of both tendencies, and resisted both on the basis of the same methodological principles.

Before turning to the details of the final chapter of Reid’s opposition to the theory of ideas, it is important to clarify two points about the dialectic. First, while the debate centered on the nature of human agency, it need not have. To defend the difference thesis from materializers, Reid needs to identify and defend only one real difference in the properties of minds and bodies; i.e., he needs to identify only one concept featured in natural beliefs about our minds that is not satisfied by material things. In fact he thinks features of both thought and agency are incompatible with the properties of matter (EAP IV xi, 267). For reasons already noted, Reid might have taken his stand against materialization on the grounds that some mental states imply a conscious subject and exist only as long as they are experienced – which is not true of matter. Reid’s battle over agency is therefore not his

last line of defense against materialism. Second, his opponents in the debate about agency are the necessitarians of 18th century British philosophy, not all of whom were materialists.¹⁵ Their project was rather to treat human action as perfectly consistent with other natural changes, i.e., consistent with human action being necessitated by prior states and causal laws. The central question was whether there is anything in our experience of and natural beliefs about agency that resists this sort of treatment. A negative answer does not require materialization, but any plausible materialism requires a negative answer. A successful defense of necessitarianism removes a major obstacle to a materialist account of the human person. In this respect, the views of agency Reid engages may be said to have a tendency toward materialization.

It is rather surprising that the challenge from materialization did not occupy Reid earlier. The core reasoning is present in Hume's *Treatise*, as Reid himself notes (EAP I ii, 19). In book I, part 3, section 14, Hume submits the idea of active power to the same withering empiricist analysis that motivated conceptual skepticism about the external world; and book II, part 3, section 1, the idea of liberty receives more of the same. Hume's empiricist version of the theory of ideas, sends us in search of the impression from which any idea is copied. If none can be found, we dismiss the supposed idea as meaningless jargon; if an impression can be found, we accept the limitations it places on the content of the beliefs that employ the idea. Like his empiricist predecessors, Hume found in external perception no impression of the power connecting distinct events. He judged the power we have over our own bodies and the flow our thoughts, both of which involve reflection, no different. Through both the inward and outward senses we are aware only of distinct events following one another; neither gives any impression of the power or force by which one event necessitates another. Rather than concluding that we have no conception of power, Hume famously suggests that the constant conjunction of events in experience creates a certain sort of habit or custom of thinking of a second event upon the occurrence of the first. This feeling of anticipation is the only empirical basis Hume can find for our concept of power. Accordingly, he accepts the limitation this grounding implies about the content of our concept of causation. The only content there can be to our natural beliefs about causal relations is that experiences of the cause are always followed by experiences of the effect. Since our agency is an instance of causal powers, the only content there can be to natural beliefs about our own agency is that certain observed events (actions) regularly follow others (volitions).

Hume's reflections on the concept of liberty (as it applies to human agency) show, on the basis of similar considerations, that nothing about the idea that we are free in the exercise of our agency requires a more robust notion of active power. All there can be to the content of our concept of liberty is simply finding certain changes to follow the determinations of our will. One can in this sense act with liberty even if one has no control whatsoever over the determinations of one's will. Hume is fully aware that this account of liberty leaves out the ability to do otherwise, as well as any power over the determinations of one's will. Again,

he turns to the copy principle to provide the basic explanation. Only one action at a time can ever be conjoined in experience to the determination of our will. So we can never experience an ability to act otherwise than we do. Therefore the more robust sense of liberty – call it the libertarian concept – cannot be given an adequate empirical pedigree. The supposed contents are inadmissible.

On the basis of this double deflation of necessity, on the one hand, and liberty, on the other, Hume purports in section VII of his *Enquiry* to reconcile liberty to necessity. All it means to say that one even causes another is that the two are constantly conjoined in experience; all it means to say that agents act freely is that their actions are conjoined in experience with the determinations of their will. So there is nothing about the liberty of human action that resists integration into the same model of causal explanation that applies to physical change. Hume thus reconciles concepts of liberty and necessity, but only concepts that have been thoroughly denuded by empiricist conceptual analysis.

From Reid's point of view this is, again, simply no way to do philosophy. That we have robust conceptions of power and liberty is more certain than any theory of concept acquisition that denies it. Concepts of both power and liberty feature in what Reid considers a first principle: "that we have some degree of power over our actions, and the determinations of our will" (EIP VI v, 479). Rather than starting with a theory about the contents of our concepts and following that theory where it leads, Reid starts with reflection and careful analysis of the content of the natural beliefs surrounding the exercise of agency. To help establish the content of these beliefs, Reid traces their implications with respect to the activities from which they emerge, i.e., deliberating, resolving, promising, counseling, praising and blaming. He argues that none of these activities are rational in the absence of a belief in the ability to do otherwise and of a power over the determinations of our will (EIP VI v, 479–480; EAP I 2, 13–20; EAP IV vi, 228–236). The prevalence of these activities, insofar as they are rational, serves as evidence that we have the belief. Given the unavoidability of these activities, even those who reject the libertarian concept of liberty "find themselves under a necessity of being governed by it in their practice" (EIP VI v, 480). Most decisively, not even the partisans of necessitarianism deny that the experience of liberty includes something more than the mere constant conjunction of determinations of the will with actions; it includes a sense of power over the determinations of our will (EAP IV vi, 235). In both the *Treatise* and *Enquiry*, Hume acknowledges the "seeming experience" of not being determined by the state of our will with respect to the action that follows. On the basis of his analysis of the concepts involved, Hume treats this appearance as an illusion, and the basis of the libertarian error.¹⁶ Reid's council, again, is to reconcile our system of the mind to beliefs whose content is evident and which we cannot overthrow. Nor does he think it hard to do.

He concedes that the concept of active power is not copied from the sensations that accompany the internal or external senses. But this just shows that not all concepts are copied from sensations of sense or reflection – a conclusion already established in his earlier work on perception. Because the concept appears at such

an early stage of human development, Reid attributes it to the principles of our constitution – at least until a better explanation can be found (EIP IV v, 479; EAP IV iv, 228). He admits, further, that our notion of active power is not direct but relative, and therefore very imperfect. Our powers of understanding leave us somewhat in the dark about many things. We understand active powers only through their effects, but we understand them nonetheless (EAP I i, 11; EAP I v, 32). Powers are simply features of a thing that enable it to bring about a certain range of changes. Nor are the relative conceptions we form of powers “unfit for accurate reasoning.” Our conception of power is useful in particular for illuminating many things that are properly understood in relation to it. Reid understands *exertion* as what the possessor of an active power does to bring about an effect; *volition* as the only sort of exertions we are aware of in ourselves; *action* as the exertion of active power; *change* as the product of the exertion of active power; and *cause* as that which produces change by its exertion (EAP I i, 12–13; EAP I v, 35; also EAP IV ii, 202–206).

Reid’s concept of active power, furthermore, grounds a robust understanding of “the liberty of a moral agent.” For the “power to produce any effect implies the power not to produce it” (EAP I v, 29). In human beings power is exerted to produce action through acts of will, or volitions (EAP I v, 31). These acts imply some conception of the willed end and therefore some degree of intelligence in the agent (EAP I i, 27–33). Liberty, as Reid understands it, does not consist merely in actions following the determinations of one’s will, but in purposive and intelligent determination of one’s will toward one end rather than another (EAP IV i, 196). It is only because agents have the power to determine their will to act or not, that Reid considers them morally accountable beings (EAP IV vii, 236–237), justly meriting “esteem and approbation” or “disapprobation and blame” (EAP IV i, 197).

Reid not only believes we have these concepts of power and liberty, he believes they are coherent, and defends the coherence of the concepts in more detail than can be examined here. Defending the coherence of this family of interrelated concepts has proven, in one respect, harder to do than Reid anticipated. For Reid, agents cause change through the exertion of a power. But the exertion of a power itself seems to be a change requiring the exertion of a power. If exertion requires exertion, a regress of exertion appears unavoidable. But Reid’s texts are suggestive of a response. He says that the person is the cause of his exertions (e.g., EAP IV i, 201), the suggestion being that exertions are a different sort of thing with a different sort of causal etiology than the actions that result from them. Exactly how this difference is to be understood is a matter of ongoing scholarly debate.¹⁷ All of the options require extending the spirit of Reid’s text beyond, or even against, the letter. But there is little reason to doubt that Reid’s project in the philosophy of action can be brought to a successful completion.

If Reid is ultimately right about the content and coherence of our natural beliefs about power and liberty, then (once again, supposing the reliability of our natural beliefs) there are indeed things whose behavior is not necessitated by prior

states and causal laws. In agency there is more than one event following another with law-like regularity; there is power, volition, purposiveness, intelligence, and the liberty of a moral agent. The natural belief in agency is thus indicative of something in the powers of the human mind very different from the materialist's understanding of physical change.¹⁸ Reid's account of agency thus resists the materialization of mind as effectively as his account of perception resists the spiritualization of body. Taken together, his treatment of our intellectual and active powers outlines one plausible way to account for the curious correspondence between mind and body without eroding the difference between the two.

Notes

- 1 The source is the report of a committee, on which Reid served, to revise the curriculum of King's College, Aberdeen, 1753; quoted in Wood (1997, 295), see also (IHM, 220).
- 2 Friend and foe alike look askance at Reid's methods. Kant chides Reid's method as a subterfuge (2004, 66). Otherwise sympathetic interpreters, like Ryan Nichols, choose to rest little on Reid's methodology, calling it "the fulcrum upon which the worst interpretations of his corpus swings" (2007, 21).
- 3 Reid himself constructs this sort error theory of the attribution of causal powers to mindless objects in a letter to James Gregory (COR, 183–184).
- 4 Reprinted as "The Hume-Reid Exchange" in the manuscripts included in the critical edition of Reid's *Inquiry*; see (IHM 256–265).
- 5 This makes his work in "pneumatology" more akin to what is called today, philosophy of psychology.
- 6 Reid comes closest to the task of systematizing his philosophy in his discussion of the faculty of Judgment; see (EIP VI iv–vi, 452–512). But even here he is lackadaisical. The principle he considers most fundamental is seventh on the list, and the list makes no pretense to exhaustiveness.
- 7 Broadly Cartesian only: Reid credits Descartes with appreciating the significance of the difference thesis for our understanding of the mind, but faulted him for his complicity in the theory of ideas (IHM VII, 208–209; EIP II viii, 118–122).
- 8 Reid is taking up the gauntlet Hume himself throws down in *Enquiry* II: "those who would assert that [the Copy Principle] is not universally true nor without exception, have only one, and that an easy method of refuting it; by producing that idea which, in their opinion is not derived from this source" (1999, 98).
- 9 What follows draws on Buras (2015).
- 10 The appeal to inner observation does not stand entirely on its own; see Buras (2015, 19–21).
- 11 In a letter to Hugh Blair, Hume thus notes that Reid's philosophy "leads back to innate ideas" (IHM, 256). For analysis, see Falkenstein (2004).
- 12 See §§18–20 of Berkeley's *Treatise* (1998, 109–110); and §1.4.2 of Hume's *Treatise* (2000), 125–144.
- 13 For an overview of Reid's epistemology, see Greco (2004); the main themes of Reid's approach are expanded upon in van Woudenberg (2013) and McAllister (2016).
- 14 See Paul Wood's introduction (AC, 30–56) on the growth of Reid's interest in materialism during the 1770s, chiefly through an engagement with Joseph Priestly. Harris (2005, 17) characterizes Reid's clash with Priestly as the climax of the 18th century free will debate.
- 15 Harris (2005, 7–9) notes this as a difference between the 18th and to 17th century debates.

- 16 *Treatise* II.iii.2 (2000, 262–265); *Enquiry* VII, part I (1999, 158, n. 18).
- 17 Rowe (1991) and Hoffman (2006) treat exertions as a special class of events that do not require a prior cause; O'Connor (2000) approaches exertion not as a separate event that requires a cause but as a relation that holds between agents and their actions; Yaffe (2004) models exertion on trying, which only constitutes a separate action in cases of failure.
- 18 Reid himself took physical change to involve active powers as well; see chapters 1–3 of Yaffe (2004) examine the reasoning behind Reid's occasionalism.

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- COR *The Correspondence of Thomas Reid*, Paul Wood, ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002).
- EAP *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, Knud Haakonssen and James A. Harris, eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).
- EIP *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Derek R. Brookes, ed., with annotations by Derek R. Brookes and Knud Haakonssen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002).
- IHM *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Derek R. Brookes, ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).

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