

Reid's Critique Of The Theory Of Ideas

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One of Thomas Reid's principal virtues was to see more clearly than his predecessors that it is senseless to ask for justification of basic principles. "Principles of Common Sense" is Reid's name for those principles that we are under a necessity to take for granted in the "common concerns of life."¹ The principle that I will be primarily concerned with in this paper is common-sense realism. Briefly, this is the view that we see, hear, smell, etc., physical objects and events, and that it is incorrect to say that we perceive representations of these things. Since proponents of the theory of ideas had claimed that all we ever perceive are representations of external objects, Reid's defense of common-sense realism is at one and the same time a critique of the theory of ideas.

An ancient dream of philosophers seems to have been that they could somehow get outside the ordinary methods of discovering truth and judge the validity of the methods from a superior vantage point. The futility of such hopes has been commented on by several writers. Thus Feigl says: "Justification is a form of argument which requires some platform of basic agreement on one level, even if on a different level there is doubt or disagreement."² And Strawson makes the same point about justifying induction. "But to what standards are we appealing when we ask whether the application of inductive standards is justified or well grounded? If we cannot answer, then no sense has been given to the question."³

Reid saw the limits of justification, but it is not clear that Hume did. A basic principle of Reid's is the comprehensive principle "*That the natural faculties, by which we distinguish truth from error are not fallacious.*"⁴ Any attempt to prove this would be reasoning in a circle. Another principle is "The future will resemble the past."⁵ Hume

had shown that the attempt to justify induction involves reasoning in a circle, and he seems to have thought that he had cast doubt on the reliability of induction. Hume may have realized at times that it is pointless to try to justify basic principles, but the dream that it could be done continued to exert its influence. Reid, on the other hand, clearly understands the necessity of operating within a framework of basic principles.

Reid also thought that first principles are original or innate. They could not have been acquired because they are the only means by which any knowledge can be acquired. Here again Hume has a divided mind. Whereas he will say "unless nature had given some original qualities to the mind, it could never have any secondary ones,"⁶ he will also say that habit, or custom "arises from past observation and experience."⁷ In other words, the means of learning anything has to be learned itself.

Reid's epistemology is centered on his critique of the theory of ideas. He said he had been an advocate of the theory until he read Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* and discovered a flawed hypothesis lying behind the theory.

The hypothesis, I mean, is, that nothing is perceived but what is in the mind which perceives it ... I thought it unreasonable ... to admit a hypothesis which, in my opinion, overturns all philosophy, all religion and virtue, and all common sense ... and finding that all the systems concerning the human understanding which I was acquainted with, were built upon this hypothesis, I resolved to inquire into this subject anew.⁸

Reid is not tilting at windmills. Speaking of the things we perceive, Berkeley says, "Their *esse* is *percipi*; nor is it possible they should have any existence out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them."¹⁰ And Descartes and Locke were also convinced that we perceive nothing but our own ideas.

Right from the start Locke realized the difficulty posed by the hypothesis that ideas are the only objects perceived.

It is evident that the mind knows not things immediately, but only by the intervention of the ideas it has of them. Our knowledge therefore is real only so far as there is a conformity between our ideas and the reality of things. But what shall here be the criterion? How shall the mind, when it perceives nothing but its own ideas, know that they agree with things themselves?"

Berkeley eliminates Locke's problem by identifying ideas and objects. Objects are directly perceived, because objects are ideas and ideas are directly perceived. Common-sense realists accept the conclusion that objects are directly perceived but reject the premise that objects are ideas. Hume seems to have remained a representationalist; however, he attributes a view to ordinary people that is similar to Berkeley's view. Ordinary people think that they perceive things, not copies of things, but they also think that their perceptions and the things perceived are identical.¹² The only difference between Berkeley and ordinary people is that the latter believe that perceptions can exist when absent from consciousness. Reid agrees that ordinary people think that they perceive the things themselves, but he thinks that they are aware of the distinction between perceiving things and the things perceived.

The ordinary person easily distinguishes the perception of something (seeing something green) from what is perceived (something green), but adherents of the ideal theory find this difficult. Reid gives Hume as an example.

When I see the full moon, the full moon is one thing, my perceiving it is another thing. Which of these does he call an impression? Everything he says about [the distinction] tends

to darken it, and to lead us to think that the full moon which I see, and my seeing it, are not two things, but one and the same thing.¹³

The ideal theorists wrongly supposed that such terms as red, loud, sweet, and stinky apply to experiences rather than to experienced objects. In contrast, the vulgar have names for the qualities of physical objects and events but no names for the sensations by which the qualities are perceived.¹⁴ So the disagreement is primarily a disagreement about the meaning of words, but the philosophers' failure to understand what the standard meanings of the words are may be the source of their false belief that qualities of external objects are never perceived.

More generally, the ideal theorists did not recognize the difference between sensation and perception. Sensations, unlike perceptions, do not have objects distinct from themselves. So the ideal theorists modelled perception after sensation and thought that the objects of perception are internal to the perceptions.

Comparing the sentences, "I feel a pain" and "I see a tree," Reid says:

The grammatical analysis of both expressions is the same: for both consist of an active verb and an object. But if we attend to the things signified by these expressions, we shall find that, in the first, the distinction between the act and the object is not real but grammatical; in the second, the distinction is not only grammatical but real.¹⁵

"A pain" describes a feeling; the pain has no existence apart from the feeling. "A tree," on the other hand, refers to an independently existing object that would have been there whether it had been seen or not. The description "a pain in my toe" describes my consciousness, not my toe. On the other hand, Reid distinguishes a pain in a toe

from a disorder in the toe.¹⁶ The pain, which exists in the mind, could be the means of perceiving the disorder, which exists in the toe. Like all objects of perception, the disorder is independent of the perception. It could continue to exist even if a pain-killer has removed the pain.

Reid distinguishes talking about sensation from talking about perception, but "sensation" must be construed broadly; when reference is made to a language of sensation. In fact, "sensation," when used broadly, covers any conscious state as well as dispositional states that are manifested in consciousness. Reid discusses conception, or thinking of something.¹⁷ Painting a picture is compared with thinking of a picture. The picture is distinct from the painting of it; it will continue to exist after the action has been completed. But when the picture is merely thought of, the image in the mind is not a distinct object but is the same as the thought itself. Neither sensation nor conception entail an independently existing object.

Locke had said that the mind knows external objects only by the intervention of ideas. Reid's position is somewhat similar. He says that a perception and the object perceived are two distinct things and that we come to know the latter by means of the former.¹⁸ This might suggest that Reid remains within the confines of the theory of ideas, and when he agrees with Berkeley and Hume that knowledge of bodies and their qualities cannot be obtained by "reasoning from our sensations,"¹⁹ Reid seems to face the same quandary that Locke had faced. However, there is a difference. Whereas all the ideal theorists, except Berkeley, thought that beliefs about external objects are founded on unverifiable inferences from ideas, Reid thought that the relation between a sensation and its external stimulus is not one of inference at all. Instead, the sensation is nothing but the awareness of the stimulus. When I see a red light, my visual experience is my awareness of the red light. Since there is no other awareness of the light that is based on this awareness, the visual experience can be regarded as a direct awareness of the light.

When it is compared with Reid's position on the relation between sensation and object, three defects of the ideal theory are revealed. The theory assumes that the relation between sensation and object is inferential, but actually only a causal relation is involved. Stimuli have effects on the sense organs of people, and it is the sensory experiences that constitute our awareness of the stimuli. A second defect is that the ideal theorists assumed that what we are aware of when we have a sensory experience is the sensory experience itself. This is not the case. Reid says that many sensations involved in perception "are never attended to, nor reflected upon."²⁰ The assumption that we are never conscious of anything but the operations of our own minds is mistaken.

A third defect of the ideal theory is its assumption that a perception is veridical only if there is a strong resemblance between the perception and the thing perceived. This is apparent in the writings of Descartes, Locke, and Hume. And Hume made it clear that there is no way such a resemblance could be discovered. "It is a question of fact," Hume says, "whether the perceptions of the senses be produced by external objects resembling them." Then the issue must be settled by experience, but "here experience is and must be entirely silent" for "the mind has never anything present to it but the perceptions ..."²¹

Reid agrees that resemblance between sensory experiences and perceived objects cannot be proved. Indeed he thinks that the belief that sensations resemble their causes is false. He says that sensations and the qualities of objects are as unlike as pain and the point of a sword.²² And he is convinced that ordinary people do not suppose a resemblance between perceptions and objects.²³

Questions like "Is red like my experience of it?" are meaningless. As Reid suggests, the visual experience I have in the presence of something red is my awareness of the red thing. People who wonder whether I discover the true color of an object in this way must suppose that there is another way of being aware of the color that is

untainted by any effect of the object on the perceiver. Sometimes the findings of one sense can be compared with the findings of another sense, as when I see that the object is round and also feel that it is round, but there is no reason to suppose that one of these experiences is more like the "real" shape than the other.

Because he makes a distinction between experiences and the things experienced, some critics have assumed that Reid must necessarily base his awareness of things on the awareness of his experiences. I have been trying to show that this is not the case. One critic thinks that Reid's theory of signs may have led him back into the theory of ideas.²⁴ Although I do not wholly agree, I can see how the theory of signs may mislead. Compare Reid's first and third classes of natural signs.²⁵ "The first class of natural signs," Reid says, "comprehends those whose connection with the thing signified is established by nature, but discovered only by experience." The third class of natural signs "comprehends those which, though we never before had any notion or conception of the thing signified, do suggest it ... and at once give us a conception and create a belief of it." To illustrate the difference between the two kinds of sign, consider a simple relation that some organism has learned: a certain sound is followed seconds later by a light turning red. The sound is the sign and the light turning red is the signified event. Both the sign and the signified event are experienced by the organism and the experiences are linked in its nervous system. This is the kind of relation that is usually meant when we speak of signs. Two relations that might go unnoticed are the relation between the auditory stimulus and the auditory experience and the relation between the visual stimulus and the visual experience. Unlike the previous relation, there is nothing to be associated in either of these relations. The organism gets its information about the auditory and visual stimuli from its experiences. In neither case does anything have to be associated to obtain the information.

Though the relation between a sensory stimulus and a sensory

experience is not a sign relation in the ordinary meaning of "sign," perhaps there is a meaning of "sign," such that A is said to be a sign of B if, when A occurs, B always or nearly always occurs—nothing being said about a requirement that the relation be observed. However, Reid should make clear that "sign" is used in its ordinary sense. And it is important that the nature of the relation between sensations and perceptual objects not be obscured. Cognitive contact with the world is made through this relation, and if it is assimilated to the first, all relation becomes association of ideas and the world is lost.

Though his discussion of signs tends to obscure the relation between sensations and objects, elsewhere Reid is fairly clear that a sensation is the organism's awareness of the object producing the sensation. However, Reid knew the attraction of the ideal theory for thinking people; he even coined the term "metaphysical lunacy" to refer to the condition of people who accepted the theory. So he would not have been surprised to learn that he had not entirely escaped its mesmerizing influence. But even if he did suffer occasional lapses no person has done more to diagnose the malady and prescribe remedies for its cure.

Notes

1. Quoted in Keith Lehrer, *Thomas Reid* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 30.
2. Herbert Feigl, "De Principiis Non Est disputandum" in *Readings in Introductory Philosophical Analysis*, ed. John Hospers, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 127.
3. P.F. Strawson, "The 'Justification' of Induction," in *Philosophy: An Introduction*, ed. Margaret D. Wilson, Dan W. Brock, and Richard F. Kuhns, Jr. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1972), p. 408

4. Thomas Reid, *Inquiry and Essays*, ed. Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1983), p. 275.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 283.
6. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1888), p. 280.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
8. Quoted in Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1960), p. 4.
9. George Berkeley, *Berkeley's Philosophical Writings*, ed. David M. Armstrong (New York: Collier Books, 1965), p. 62.
10. Hume, *Hume's Enquiries*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1902), p. 152.
11. John Locke. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. A.D. Woozley (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 348.
12. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 206.
13. Reid, p. 145.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

17. Ibid., pp. 219-220.

18. Ibid., p. 139.

19. Quoted in Lehrer, p. 45.

20. Reid, p. 188.

21. *Hume's Enquiries*, p. 153.

22. Quoted in Lehrer, p. 49.

23. Reid, p. 28.

24. Lynn Forguson, *Common Sense* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 119-124.

25. Reid, pp. 41-44.