



Thomas Reid's Philosophy of Mind: Consciousness and Intentionality

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Abstract

Thomas Reid's epistemological ambitions are decisively at the center of his work. However, if we take such ambitions to be the whole story, we are apt to overlook the theory of mind that Reid develops and deploys against the theory of ideas. Reid's philosophy of mind is sophisticated and strikingly contemporary, and has, until recently, been lost in the shadow of his other philosophical accomplishments. Here I survey some aspects of Reid's theory of mind that I find most interesting. I examine whether Reid is a mysterian about the mind, whether Reid has a direct realist theory of perception, and whether Reid has a higher-order, or "inner-sense," view of consciousness. Along the way I will mention portions of the secondary literature that examine these aspects and point out whether and to what degree I part ways with the interpretations present in the literature.

Thomas Reid (1710–1796) is best known for his epistemology of "common sense," his criticisms of Locke's theory of personal identity and his work on free will. The *Inquiry Into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764), and the *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785) have the epistemological traditions of Reid's day and the skepticism he takes them to entail firmly within sights. Reid criticizes what he calls "the theory of ideas," which confines knowledge to only 1) those cognitive relations we bear to mental items (ideas) immediately, which items serve as representatives of extra-mental objects, properties and events; and 2) those cognitive relations properly mediated by such mental representatives. Reid offers his famous philosophy of common sense as an alternative to the theory of ideas.

Reid's epistemological ambitions, then, are decisively at the center of his work. However, if we take such ambitions to be the whole story of the *Inquiry* and *Essays* we are apt to overlook the theory of mind that Reid develops and deploys against the theory of ideas. Reid's philosophy of mind is sophisticated and strikingly contemporary, and has, until recently, been lost in the shadow of his other philosophical accomplishments. Here I survey some aspects of Reid's theory of mind that I find most interesting. Along the way I will mention portions of the secondary literature that examine these aspects and point out whether and to what degree I part ways with the interpretations present in the literature.

1. Does Reid Have a Theory of Mind?

Throughout the *Inquiry* and *Essays*, Reid reminds us that the operations of the mind are “unaccountable” and “shrouded in darkness.” For example, the relationship between sensations (what we would now think of as the phenomenal character of perceptual experience) and perceptions (what we would now think of as the representational content of perceptual experience) consists, Reid says, in a “natural kind of magic.” Because this theme is both frequent and persistent, it is difficult not to take Reid at his word, and many commentators do so. No one has emphasized this feature of Reid's thought more persuasively than Nicholas Wolterstorff (2001, 2004). According to Wolterstorff, these passages reveal Reid's Christian humility and piety. The acts and operations of the mind must be resolved ultimately into the will of God; any attempt to explain the inexplicable is profane.

Alternatively, I have suggested that we can take Reid at his word without reading him as a quietist (or, to use the contemporary pejorative, a “mysterian”) so long as we understand just what it is that Reid thinks we cannot explain (Copenhaver, forthcoming). Among his contemporaries, no one is more obviously influenced by Bacon and Newton than is Reid. He (rightly or wrongly) took Newton's *hypotheses non fingo* as the guiding methodology for natural science and philosophy. According to Reid, we have learned from Newton that science does not search for *causes*; rather, it searches for *laws of nature*.

The theory of ideas posits ideas as causes in order to explain perception, memory, consciousness, and other acts and operations of the mind. Reid argues that this runs afoul of Newton's “rules of philosophizing”: 1) posit no unobservable causes; and 2) posit only those causes sufficient to explain the phenomena in question. We have no observational evidence for the existence of ideas – understood as images or resemblances of extra-mental objects – and even if we had such evidence, their existence would be insufficient for explaining how our experiences, thoughts, beliefs, and other mental states come to be directed at or about objects. In other words, ideas are insufficient to explain the intentionality of our mental states. If ideas represent objects by being images or resemblances of those objects, we must first get a mental grip on the ideas themselves in order to read off from them to what they represent. But this presupposes rather than explains how it is that we can get a mental grip on something.

The important thing to notice is that the theory of ideas ends up running afoul of the Newtonian strictures because it got off on the wrong foot by attempting a *causal* explanation. Rather, we ought to explain the operations of mind by making observations and inductively formulating increasingly general laws of nature. The laws thus induced are then used to explain phenomena.

It will be useful here to take brief sojourn into Reid's theory of causation. Reid distinguishes between physical causes and efficient causes. Only the

latter are true causes; only substances with wills – agents – may be causes. Material substance, Reid says, is a “dead, inactive thing” and cannot, strictly speaking, be a cause. We can continue to speak of billiard balls *causing* other billiard balls to move so long as we keep in mind that we are using the word figuratively. We can take Reid at his word about the causes of mental operations being shrouded in darkness without thereby committing him to the claim that mental operations are inexplicable by the methods of the new science because, according to Reid, *ultimate causes* – that is, *efficient causes* – are beyond the scope of natural science and philosophy. But this does not leave natural science and philosophy unable to explain the mental operations themselves. It will explain these phenomena in precisely the same manner as it explains physical phenomena: through observation and inductive generalization.

And so Reid has a theory of mind after all, and I will briefly sketch some of its details below. But I would like to draw one final moral from Reid's treatment of mind by Newtonian methodology. The laws of nature, according to Reid, are the laws by which God's agency manifests itself and insofar as natural science and philosophy reveal the laws of nature, they reveal God's intentions. God could have willed that the laws were otherwise than they are and he could suspend or alter a law of nature (resulting in a miracle). But so long as the laws of nature that God wills are in place, the events over which they range are governed by necessity. To put this in contemporary terms, the events that come about in accordance with the laws of nature are nomologically necessary rather than metaphysically necessary. Notice, however, that although Reid is a substance dualist, he holds that *both* mind and body are explainable in terms of *natural laws*. We may not only explain the mind, our explanation will be a *natural* explanation. Substance dualism living comfortably side-by-side a kind of naturalism will seem odd from the perspective of contemporary philosophy, but providential naturalism is an estimable position for an Enlightenment philosopher devoted to God and science.

2. Reid's Theory of Perception

Central to Reid's theory of perception is his distinction between sensation and perception. Reid's standard schema of the perceptual process goes like this: 1) a material object or property produces a physical impression on our bodies, nerves, and brains; 2) this physical impression occasions a sensation; 3) this sensation suggests a conception of and belief about the material object or property that originally produced the material impression; and 4) this conception and belief pair is a perception of a material object or property. The talk of “producing,” “occasioning,” and “suggesting” here is a direct result of Reid's theory of causation: only agents may be causes, and material objects, properties, impressions, and sensations are not agents. The series of events that make up the perceptual process are governed by a law of nature, and as such nomologically necessary. Notice too that perception is a purely intellectual mental state – it consists solely in a conception of and belief

about a presently existing material object or property. Sensation supplies the qualitative character of perceptual experience, while the complex mental states consisting in a conception and belief supplies the representational content of perceptual experience.

Recall that according to Reid, sensations suggest perceptions by a “natural kind of magic.” But Reid tells us more about this natural yet magical relation. Sensations, Reid claims, are natural signs. Sensations signify the material objects or properties that originally produced the material impressions that occasioned them – and they do so *by* suggesting a conception of and belief about the material object or property. Reid's understanding of natural signs is modeled on his understanding of artificial signs, such as words. Words refer to what they do not in virtue of their intrinsic qualities – their shape, size, or orientation on the page – but by extrinsic linguistic conventions. In addition, if one is a competent speaker and reader of a language, when presented with a word one will immediately think not of the word but of what the word means. So long as one is party to the convention by which some item becomes a sign, when one is presented with the sign one will attend not to the sign but to its sense.

And so it is with sensations, according to Reid. Upon having a sensation, the mind is directed not towards the sensation itself but to that with which it is connected by convention. In other words, upon having a sensation one will conceive of and form a belief not about the sensation but about a material object or property. The difference between *natural* signs (such as sensations) and *artificial* signs (such as words) rests in whose conventions secure the sign–signified relation: human conventions make artificial signs possible; God's conventions make natural signs possible. And what are God's conventions? The laws of nature.

The fact that Reid regards sensations as *signs* and the fact that he claims that we *interpret* sensations leads some commentators (Wolterstorff, 2000, 2001) to hold that Reid is not a direct realist. After all, it is only by means of a mediating sensation, which signifies material objects and properties that we come to perceive material objects and properties. In addition, if sensations *already* supply us with information about material objects and properties – and surely they must if they are natural signs of them – then the conception ingredient in perception must be a kind of apprehension by concept application (or what Russell would have called “knowledge by description”). If the conception were a kind of non-conceptual, demonstrative thought (which might be called “knowledge by acquaintance”) that immediately presented an object or property to the mind there would be an odd superfluity in the perceptual process: after all, we will *already* have had the object or property in mind prior to conceiving of it given that sensations signify the object or property. Direct realism is sacrificed twice-fold: sensations provide the information required in order to perceive material objects and properties and the conception ingredient in perception is mediated by concept-application.

I have argued, as have others (Van Cleve 2004), that this interpretation fails to take seriously Reid's analogy between artificial and natural signs. Just as words, alone of themselves, do not have meaning, sensations, alone of themselves, signify nothing. Nothing about the word "cat" in and of itself *makes* it about cats. So too, nothing about our sensations, in and of themselves, *makes* them signs of material objects or properties. Yes, Reid does speak of our interpreting sensations. But such interpretation consists solely in conceiving of and forming a belief about the material object or property that initiates the perceptual process. If this is the case, then it is *conception* not *sensation* that supplies the referent for the belief in the conception–belief pair that constitutes perception.

Reid's direct realism reveals something important about direct realism quite generally. Namely, mediation *tout court* is irrelevant to whether perception is direct. After all, all sorts of things mediate perceptual experience: photons, sensory organs, nerve impulses, etc. It is only mediation of a particular sort that sacrifices directness. If the mediating entity (be it mental or extra-mental) is such that one *must* bear some cognitive relation to it (be it thought-like or experiential) which relation provides information necessary for getting a separate object or property in mind, then the process sacrifices directness. But sensations do not function this way for Reid. We can attend to our sensations (with great difficulty) according to Reid, but our attention to them would provide us with no more information about material objects or properties than had we not attended to them. By attending to sensations we can learn more about *sensations*, but in the first instance sensations function to direct our minds towards objects and properties, and they do so not because sensations are about material objects or properties. They do so because they suggest mental states that *are* about material objects and properties: perceptions. Sensations are intentional or representational in a merely derivative sense: insofar as they suggest mental states that are intrinsically intentional or representational (perceptions) they *acquire* a kind of derivative intentionality. Like words, alone of themselves sensations are referentially empty.

Recently, Todd Buras (2005) has challenged the notion that sensations are referentially empty, and his challenge highlights an interpretive issue that is thus far underexplored among Reid scholars. The issue concerns how we are to understand what sorts of things sensations are – or, to put it in more contemporary terms, how to understand the phenomenal character of perceptual experience. One way to explain the phenomenal character of experience is to posit phenomenal *particulars* – *à la* sense–datum theory. To do so in order to understand Reid, however, would undercut his criticism of the theory of ideas, and I know of no interpreter who has suggested such an interpretation. Another way of accounting for the phenomenal character of experience would be to posit phenomenal *properties* of experiences (or *qualia*) – *à la* adverbialism. James Van Cleve (2004) and Ernest Sosa (Van Cleve and Sosa 2001) have presented this interpretive option for understanding Reid. Yet another way, however, of accounting for the

phenomenal character of experience is to hold that it is exhausted by, or supervenient on, the representational content of experience – *à la* representationalism, or as it is sometimes called, intentionalism.

I favor the last as an interpretive scheme for understanding Reid. On first glance, however, this interpretation runs into serious problems. Reid holds that God could have and could will that those sensations that signify what they do, signify entirely different material objects or properties. In other words, Reid holds that there can be not only spectrum inversion but also radical intermodal inversion. Indeed, Reid holds that God could have willed that we be purely intellectual perceivers – like God and angels – who perceive material objects and properties without having any sensations at all. If representationalism holds that there can be no change in the phenomenal character of experience without a change in the representational content of experience (given that phenomenal character supervenes on representational content) then it looks as though Reid cannot be read as a representationalist after all. Reid holds that there are possible worlds on which there are beings who have sensations that are qualitatively identical to ours, but whose sensations suggest conceptions of and beliefs about wholly different material objects and properties than do ours. However, recall that sensations are connected with perceptions by a law of nature – a law of nature that renders the events over which it ranges nomologically rather than metaphysically necessary. One promising way of reading Reid as a representationalist would be to hold that the phenomenal character of experience supervenes on representational content in those worlds with the same laws of nature as ours.

I should like to return to Buras's recent claim that sensations are not referentially empty. Reid's texts are ambiguous with regards to whether sensations have no objects whatsoever, in which case they are referentially empty, or whether they take themselves reflexively as objects, in which case they would not. Buras provides several arguments to support the reflexive interpretation. However, I would like to focus on one that leads to my next topic of discussion: Reid's theory of consciousness. My rendition of this particular argument goes roughly like this: Reid holds that we are conscious of all of our mental states (note, he does not hold that we *attend* to all of our mental states). Any mental state of which we are conscious is a conscious mental state. What is it for a mental state to be conscious is for it to make us aware of some thing or fact, i.e., for it to have some representational content. No mental state can make us aware of some thing or fact if it is referentially empty. Sensations are mental states. Therefore, sensations are not referentially empty.

3. Reid's Theory of Consciousness

It is the case that Reid holds that we are conscious of all of our mental states. In addition, Reid claims that aside from the fact that Locke confounds

memory with consciousness, he agrees with Locke's account of consciousness. Contemporary philosophers of mind take Locke to be the progenitor of the "higher-order perception" view of consciousness on which what it is for a mental state to be conscious is for it to be the object of a higher-order experiential mental state that makes one conscious of being in that mental state. It appears, then, that if contemporary philosophers have Locke right, and if Reid has Locke right, and if Reid has Reid right, then Reid is an example *par excellence* of someone who holds a higher-order perception theory of consciousness. And, if Buras is right that this higher-order interpretation entails is that a mental state is made conscious, in a sense that requires it to have representational content, by being the object of a higher-order mental state, then it looks as though he makes a good case for the reflexive interpretation of sensations. I will argue, however, that despite appearances, Reid (and perhaps Locke) does not hold a higher-order perception theory of consciousness.

As I've said, I find the representationalist understanding of the qualitative character of experience to be the most promising route for understanding Reid. But contemporary representationalists differ among themselves in how to understand consciousness. In order to understand the disagreement it will be useful to clear up some terminological issues. First, there is a distinction between what we call *creature consciousness* and *state consciousness*. Additionally, *creatures* may be conscious in two senses: an *intransitive* sense in which a creature is conscious so long as she is not knocked out, or dead, and a *transitive* sense in which a creature is conscious if she is aware of some thing or fact. But both these senses of *creature consciousness* ought to be distinguished from the sense in which a *mental state* is conscious. As befits a thinker in the modern period, Reid confines himself to the vocabulary of creature consciousness. Nevertheless, in order to determine whether Reid holds a higher-order view of consciousness, we will have to treat Reid as recognizing the phenomenon captured by the notion of state consciousness: namely that there are mental states (Reid would say acts and operations) that are conscious in an intransitive sense.

Representationalists disagree with one another with respect to the *relationship* between *creature consciousness* and *state consciousness*. According to first-order representationalists, a *creature* is conscious of some thing or fact by being in some conscious mental *state* and a mental *state* is conscious by playing a role in making a *creature* conscious of some thing or fact. According to second-order representationalists, a mental *state* is conscious in virtue of a *creature* being conscious of it. In other words, a mental *state* is made conscious by being the *object* of some higher-order representational mental state. In having this higher-order representational mental *state*, a *creature* is thereby conscious of her mental state, which mental state is thereby rendered conscious (note that the higher-order representational mental state need not be itself conscious).

Reid's texts are clear and unambiguous: Reid holds that we (creatures) are conscious of all of our mental acts and operations (what we would now call mental states). On first glance, then, it seems equally as clear that Reid subscribes to the higher-order representationalist model of consciousness. After all, if consciousness is the awareness a creature bears to her own mental states – and Reid is adamant that it is – then it looks as though if a creature has a conscious mental state, she does so in virtue of being conscious of her mental state.

But this understanding of Reid hinges on conflating two different claims: 1) that consciousness consists in the awareness a creature bears to her own mental states; and 2) those mental states of which a creature is conscious are themselves conscious mental states *in virtue of* the awareness a creature bears to them. The first claims that consciousness consists in having a representational mental state that takes only mental states as its object. The second claims that what it is for a mental state to *be* conscious is for it to be the object of a separate representational mental state. Reid undoubtedly endorses the first claim, but this does not entail that he would endorse the second. Reid can hold that consciousness is the awareness of one's own current mental states and refrain from holding that the awareness of one's own current mental states *makes those states conscious*.

Reid distinguishes the various operations of the mind by which we are aware of things or facts by the intentional objects of the operations. Perception takes only presently existing material objects and properties as its objects. Memory takes only past events of which one was either agent or witness as its objects. And consciousness takes only present operations of the mind as its objects. All are forms of *awareness* – in having perceptions, memories, and other representational mental states we are conscious of things and facts. Yes, Reid reserves the word “consciousness” for only those acts of awareness that take current mental states as their objects. But there is no reason to suppose that consciousness, on Reid's account, is any more higher-order than are perception and memory.

Higher-order representationalists must have a reason, independent of conceptual analysis of the word “conscious,” for claiming that mental states are conscious in virtue of a creature being conscious of them. They do provide a reason: ordinary and experimental empirical evidence shows that some mental states are *unconscious*. Additionally, the higher-order representationalist avoids a potential regress of higher-order states by holding that some of our mental states are unconscious. The notion that some of our mental states are unconscious is the strongest motivation for holding a higher-order representationalist view. But Reid could not have possibly had this motivation. If Reid holds – as he does – that we are conscious of all of our mental states *and* he holds that mental states are conscious in virtue of a creature's consciousness of them – as he would hold, were he a higher-order theorist – then Reid would be committed to the claim that there are no unconscious mental states.

The higher-order representationalist view suggests a natural reading of the difference between consciousness and introspection. Our mental states are conscious when we are conscious of them, and our mental states are introspected when we are conscious of our consciousness of them. By contrast, a first-order theorist can hold that in addition to being aware of tables, chairs, colors, events (via perception, memory and other externally directed operations), and present mental operations (via consciousness), we can direct our *attention* to these object of awareness by an act of will. This is what Reid calls *reflection*. When the object to which we direct our attention is a mental state or operation given in consciousness, this is what we now call *introspection*, though it a mere species of the genus reflection, according to Reid. There are a number of ways of drawing the reflection/introspection/consciousness distinction open to a first-order theorist, but the important thing to notice here is that Reid's account of reflection, introspection, and consciousness – indeed his account of mind in general – does not display the sort of multiplicity of hierarchical relationships to which the higher-order view is committed.

Recall Buras's argument: Reid holds that we are conscious of all of our mental states. Any mental state of which we are conscious is a conscious mental state. What is it for a mental state to be conscious is for it to have some representational content. No mental state can have representational content if it is referentially empty. Sensations are mental states. Therefore, sensations are not referentially empty. Notice that the second premise rests on interpreting Reid's theory as a higher-order theory on which awareness of mental states makes those states conscious. I have argued that we ought to resist such an interpretation. Notice too that the third premise employs a notion of consciousness *not* employed by the higher-order theorist. According to the higher-order theorist, what makes a mental state conscious is not whether it has representational content (though it may have representational content) but whether it is the object of a higher-order mental state. The argument rests on an equivocation. There is no reason to suppose that by virtue of being aware of our sensations, sensations themselves are made modes of awareness.

4. Conclusion

There is no question that Reid's theory of mind has serious epistemological consequences. Reid certainly thought so. The philosophy of mind and epistemology are so intimately entwined that prying them apart can often result in distinctions and insights that are at best clumsy and at worst misleading. I do not wish to discount Reid's epistemology or to discourage research on it. I mean only to remind that Reid does have a robust theory of mind that deserves examination in its own right. Moreover, I suspect that such examination will illuminate and expand our understanding of Reid's epistemology.

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