

# Understanding Thomas Reid

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**Abstract:** Thomas Reid offers a powerful challenge to Hume and his skeptical system. In “Thomas Reid on Epistemic Principles,” William Alston gives an explanation of that challenge and concludes in favor of a Reidian-inspired thesis. I argue, however, that Alston’s thesis is a diluted version of Reid’s radical position, one that Reid’s principles cannot accommodate. Thus, I conclude that, because Alston’s position is not available, we are left with Reid’s radical thesis, with which we are rightly uncomfortable.

Thomas Reid gives a deep and important challenge to Hume and his skeptical system. In “Thomas Reid on Epistemic Principles,” William Alston offers an explanation of that challenge and concludes in favor of a Reidian-inspired thesis. That thesis is, namely, that there is no reasonable approach to knowledge other than to simply accept the outputs of our basic faculties, except where there is sufficient reason to reject a particular belief.<sup>1</sup> I follow Alston’s presentation of Reid’s challenge to Hume, but depart on the resulting thesis: I argue that Reid is more radical, or less compromising, than Alston records, and that this resulting position is not satisfactory.

Hume argued to many skeptical theses, and Reid very often concluded in opposition to him. For instance, Hume argued that we have no adequate idea of power at all. Reid, on the other hand, concludes that “we have some degree of

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<sup>1</sup> William P. Alston, “Thomas Reid on Epistemic Principles,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 2.4 (1985): 448.



power over our actions, and the determinations of our will.”<sup>2</sup> Important, though, is how he gets there, for he seems, in large part, to consent to the progression of Hume’s thought. Indeed, Reid concedes, “It is not easy to say in what way we first get the notion or idea of power,” as well as that if we can’t describe how we get the idea, it’s not a very distinct idea at all.<sup>3</sup> This of course is where Hume’s doubt begins, and Reid follows the argument from here. He agrees we do not get the idea of power from our external senses: “We see events, one succeeding another; but we see not the power by which they are produced.”<sup>4</sup> Nor do we get it from internal reflection: “We are conscious of the operations of our minds; but power is not an operation of mind.”<sup>5</sup>

Because all our ideas come from either external senses or internal reflection, and neither the external senses nor internal reflection provide the idea of power, Hume concludes that we must not have any idea of power. But, though Reid follows Hume’s argument right up to the very end, he draws a drastically different conclusion. “It is in vain to reason from a hypothesis against a fact,”<sup>6</sup> the truth of which is readily apparent to every man, Reid writes. It is the second part of the preceding line that is very important. For Reid, the universal consent of mankind to a belief, as well as the irresistibility of a belief, or the necessity of a belief for normal life, each strongly indicate that the belief should be taken as an incontrovertible first principle. Given that the belief in power has all of these characteristics, Reid can thus, opposite to Hume, hold on to our idea of power, and let go of the doctrine that all our ideas come through either the senses or reflection.

A similar pattern of dialectic is repeated in discussions of induction, the thinking self above and beyond the thoughts and the body below the object’s perceivable qualities, and elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> And so the debate between Hume and Reid is transformed. Reid does not submit to Humean assumptions and quibble about the

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, ed. James Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1850): 365.

<sup>3</sup> Reid, *Essays*, 365.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

<sup>7</sup> The pattern can be found in relation to induction on *Essays*, 374 and to self and body on 382.

conclusions that are to be drawn. Rather, his challenge is more basic, more fundamental; he offers a comprehensive alternative to Hume. Hume begins with reason as his first principle and argues to skeptical conclusions. Reid carves out his own first principles, based on his criteria of universality, irresistibility, and necessity, and derives anti-skeptical conclusions. Thus, the center of the debate naturally shifts to first principles. And this, indeed, is where Reid makes his most important and insightful contributions.

For Reid, universality, irresistibility, and necessity are not themselves first principles, but are instead criterion for or, as Alston calls them, “marks” of first principles.<sup>8</sup> The first principles themselves concern the reliability of the cognitive faculties generally. For instance, Reid takes as first principles that “those things did really happen which I distinctly remember,” and “those things do really exist which we distinctly perceive by our senses, and are what we perceive them to be.”<sup>9</sup> These principles are marked by their universality: “I shall also take for granted such facts as are attested to the conviction of all sober and reasonable men, either by our senses, by memory, or by human testimony.”<sup>10</sup> The same is held for the marks of irresistibility and necessity. While Reid’s first principles concern the reliability of the cognitive faculties generally, I will follow Alston in concentrating on perceptual beliefs and somewhat distilling Reid’s principles, in order to have something concrete to fix attention on. This is,

- (i). Perceptual beliefs about the immediate physical environment are generally true.<sup>11</sup>

Why should we accept universality, irresistibility, and necessity as the marks of our first principles? Or more concretely, why should the universality, irresistibility, and necessity of perceptual beliefs count in favor of their truth? What is the connection? Does it follow from the universality, irresistibility, or necessity of a perceptual belief that that belief is true? It’s not clear that it does. Moreover, as Alston points out, Reid faces a bigger problem, that of epistemic circularity. How can I

<sup>8</sup> William P. Alston, “Thomas Reid on Epistemic Principles,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 2.4 (1985): 442.

<sup>9</sup> Reid, *Essays*, 617 & 625.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>11</sup> Alston, “Thomas Reid on Epistemic Principles,” 437.



know that (i). is accepted universally, that it is irresistible, or that it is necessary for the conduct of life? I know these on the basis of perceptual experience. Therefore, the truth of (i). is an essential epistemic presupposition of the marks; their ability to recommend a belief for first principle status is poisoned by circularity.<sup>12</sup> Thus we conclude that if he takes the marks to argue for the truth of his first principles, Reid has been defeated by circularity.

With admirable clarity Alston shows this is not the case. The marks, he argues, are only secondary, indirect indicators of Reid's first principles; their main support is derived elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> Alston is led to this interpretation by considering what Reid says about first principles directly. Reid, he argues, does not fall victim to epistemic circularity of first principles. On the contrary, he describes and investigates the consequences of epistemic circularity in first principles with remarkable insight. Consider Reid's comments on Descartes' treatment of first principles:

It is strange that so acute a reasoner did not perceive, that in this reasoning there is evidently a begging of the question.

For if our faculties be fallacious, why may they not deceive us in this reasoning as well as in others? And if they are to be trusted in this instance without a voucher, why not in others?<sup>14</sup>

For further explication of the same idea, here is Reid responding to Hume, in what becomes his most important objection to skepticism:

The author of the "Treatise of Human Nature" appears to me to be but a half-skeptic. He hath not followed his principles so far as they lead him; but, after having, with unparalleled intrepidity and success, combated vulgar prejudices, when he had but one blow to strike, his courage fails him, he fairly lays down his arms and yields himself a captive to the most common of all vulgar prejudices—I mean the belief of the existence of his own impressions and ideas.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 443.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 444.

<sup>14</sup> Reid, *Essays*, 631.

I beg, therefore, to have the honour of making an addition to the skeptical system, without which I conceive it cannot hang together. I affirm, that the belief of the existence of impressions and ideas, is as little supported by reason, as that of the existence of minds and bodies. No man ever did or could offer any reason for this belief. Descartes took it for granted, that he thought, and had sensations and ideas; so have all his followers done. Even the hero of skepticism hath yielded this point, I crave leave to say, weakly, and imprudently... what is there in impressions and ideas so formidable, that this all-conquering philosophy, after triumphing over every other existence, should pay homage to them? Besides, the concession is dangerous: for belief is of such a nature, that, if you leave any root, it will spread; and you may more easily put it up altogether, than say, Hitherto shalt thou go and no further: the existence of impressions and ideas I give up to thee; but see thou pretend to nothing more. A thorough and consistent skeptic will never, therefore, yield this point.

To such a skeptic I have nothing to say; but of the semiskeptic, I should beg to know, why they believe the existence of their impressions and ideas. The true reason I take to be, because they cannot help it; and the same reason will lead them to believe many other things.<sup>15</sup>

The central idea, which Reid proposes to Descartes and expands upon with Hume, is that the act of reasoning involves a begging of the question, that reason takes itself for granted. Thus, now that we see that each basic faculty meets this problem, we see that each faculty holds the same claim to being trusted. And now, then, the skeptic who charges that there are insufficient reasons to assent to perceptual beliefs can be met. As Reid says, reason and perception “both came out of the same shop;” that is, both were given to us by nature, and if one is found faulty, what

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry Into the Human Mind*, ed. Timothy Duggan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970): 81-82.



reason could we have to retain confidence in the other?<sup>16</sup> Moreover, as Reid says to Descartes, “Every kind of reasoning for the veracity of our faculties, amounts to no more than taking their own testimony for their veracity.”<sup>17</sup>

In light of this, Alston argues, the skeptic about sense perception has two options. The first is, as Reid’s amendment to the skeptical system requires, “withholding credence from all cognitive faculties.”<sup>18</sup> The true skeptic, who exempts no cognitive faculty, must rescind all beliefs. Reid stresses, “To such a skeptic I have nothing to say.”<sup>19</sup> There is nothing to say to such a skeptic for two reasons. The first is that, with the addition of Reid’s amendment, the skeptical position is for the first time fully consistent, and so in a sense invulnerable. The second reason is that, in giving up his cognitive faculties, he has given up any grounds he might have had for making a contribution to the discussion. The second option, then, is to select among the basic cognitive functions, trusting some and not others. Reid’s point about circularity, however, reveals this to be an essentially groundless activity. Why should some be trusted without a voucher and not others? The skeptic has no defensible option.

Reid’s insight concerning the circularity of justification of our basic cognitive faculties leaves us only one option. We can only accept what it is that our cognitive faculties have to offer. It is a consequence of the fact that they are indeed our basic cognitive faculties that we are not in a position to doubt them. We will not be in a position to doubt them until “God gives us new faculties to sit in judgment upon the old.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, Alston concludes, “There is no reasonable alternative to our simply following the promptings of our nature and unreservedly giving credence to the output of these faculties, except where we have sufficient reasons from other outputs to reject a particular item.”<sup>21</sup> This sentence tips us off to a challenge to Alston, and a new understanding of the struggle between Reid’s position and that of the skeptic.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>17</sup> Reid, *Essays*, 631.

<sup>18</sup> Alston, “Thomas Reid on Epistemic Principles,” 446.

<sup>19</sup> Reid, *Inquiry*, 82.

<sup>20</sup> Reid, *Essays*, 631.

<sup>21</sup> Alston, “Thomas Reid on Epistemic Principles,” 448.

The first part of Alston's conclusion seems justified, and in line with Reid's position. It is the second part, the clause "except where we have sufficient reasons from other outputs to reject a particular item," that I find especially intriguing. For, it seems it was crafted with the intention of mitigating Reid's stance. It seems to be a retreat from the spirit of the position. Two related questions arise. Why would one have an inclination to mitigate Reid's position? Can it be mitigated? That is, can this move be defended?

Consider the difference between the positions. "There is no alternative to simply following the promptings of our nature," Alston concludes, "except where we have sufficient reason from other outputs to reject a particular item."<sup>22</sup> Reid, on the other hand, states plainly that, "Those things did really happen which I distinctly remember," and that, "Those things do really exist which we distinctly perceive by our senses, and are what we perceive them to be."<sup>23</sup> Reid's statements are simply more radical. They advise an uncritical acceptance of what our cognitive faculties offer us, and, importantly, they include no clause covering exceptions. We are rightfully uncomfortable with this, for we admit the possibility of remembering something that didn't happen, or perceiving something to be a way that it isn't. Reid's position, from this perspective, appears to be too bold, and we would like to weaken it, to dilute it. We would like to add a clause covering exceptions, or the problem examples we had in mind, and thereby increase the viability of the position.

Is such a dilution, the addition of such a clause, possible? Is it defensible? No, I argue it's not. The addition of such a clause is an admission that the outputs of our faculties are sometimes at odds. More importantly, such a clause implies that when the outputs of our faculties are at odds, there is a faculty (or faculties) that is to be privileged over others. It implies that, in times of conflict, there is a faculty (or faculties) that can be or should be favored. But this admission is detrimental to the Reidian position. Consider the progression: The clause is introduced to answer to cases that, it appears, demand to be answered, like the possibility of remembering something that didn't happen. But, it cannot account for only these cases. For, in accounting for these cases, it raises a particular cognitive faculty, namely reason,

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<sup>22</sup> Alston, 448.

<sup>23</sup> Reid, *Essays*, 617, 625.



after which it becomes possible to support strong doubt. The same, of course, is true with perception: Once I admit that I might sometimes misperceive an object, there is nothing to stop me from slipping to the suspicion that I am always misperceiving.

This problem is the reciprocal of the problem Reid described in relation to the skeptic: “Besides, the concession (of the existence of impressions and ideas) is dangerous: for belief is of such a nature, that, if you leave any root, it will spread; and you may more easily put it up altogether, than say, Hitherto shalt thou go and no further.”<sup>24</sup> Returning to the clause suggested above, we see that we now face the analogue. Although doubt, or the preference of a particular cognitive faculty, is planted in a very small seed, it will spread; one cannot say, “Go here, but go no further.” Perhaps Reid recognized the problem not just for the skeptic, but the potential analogue problem too. This would explain, at least, why he makes little attempt to moderate his first principles concerning the reliability of memory, sense perception, and consciousness.

We should now have a fuller understanding of the position in which Reid leaves us. His addition to the skeptical model has made the skeptical system complete. The skeptic has conceded that the use of no cognitive faculty is free of epistemic circularity, and so has rescinded all beliefs. The Reidian position seems better, for it involves beliefs, and therefore allows for the possibility of knowledge of the world. Yet, it is far from satisfactory: It involves uncritically accepting the outputs of all our cognitive faculties, without the possibility of adding qualifiers. Reid, having demolished the middle ground, leaves us here, stranded between two radical poles, neither of which is satisfactory. ❖

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<sup>24</sup> Reid, *Inquiry*, 81-82.