GREAT PHILOSOPHERS: Thomas Reid (1710-1796)

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Some context...

Much of (Western) scholastic philosophy centres around reconciling Christian doctrine with the teachings of Plato and Aristotle.
Some context...

The ‘Early Modern’ period: (roughly) 1600-1800 AD

• René Descartes (1596-1650)
• Margaret Cavendish (1623-1723)
• John Locke (1632-1704)
• Isaac Newton (1642-1727)
• Mary Astell (1666-1731) [next week]
• George Berkeley (1685-1753)
• David Hume (1711-1776)
• Thomas Reid (1710-1796)
• Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

Reid’s ‘grand narrative’:

➢ The ‘Way of Ideas’
➢ Rise of scepticism
➢ Culminating in Hume
➢ Something needs to be done
  (Kant sort of agrees)
Thomas Reid (1710-1796)

- Born in Strachan, Scotland.
- Attends University of Aberdeen (1723-26).
- Minister in the Church of Scotland (1731-52).
- 1752: awarded professorship at King’s College Aberdeen.
- Founder of the Scottish School of Common Sense philosophy.

  *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764)
  *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785)
  *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (1788)
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Overview

1. Reid on Truth
What is the relationship between common sense and philosophy?

2. Reid’s Theory of Perception
How do we encounter the world around us?

3. Reid’s Moral Philosophy
How do we work out what’s right and wrong?
Reid’s Philosophical Method

‘I feign no hypotheses’ Isaac Newton, Principia [2nd ed.] 1713

Reid’s approach to gaining knowledge and doing philosophy:

• We ought to approach philosophical truths (e.g. what is the nature of the mind? What explains our experience of the world around us? How do we know what is right or wrong?) the same way that mathematicians do maths and physicists do physics.

• We should identify ‘first principles’ or maxims based on experience and observation and ground our reasoning.

“mathematicians have the wisdom to define accurately the terms they use, and to lay down, as axioms, the first principles on which their wisdom is grounded” (EIP 1.1, 129)
First Principles

‘First principles’ are *self-evident* statements; “they are no sooner understood than they are believed” (EIP, 555).

    e.g. ‘the sum of a thing’s parts is no greater than the whole’

“There is no searching for evidence, no weighing of arguments; the proposition is not deduced or inferred from another; it has the light of truth in itself, and no occasion to borrow it from another.”

*When a truth is self-evident, as soon as we hear it/ think it, we just know it to be true.*

Also known as; ‘axioms’, ‘principles of common sense’, ‘common notions’, ‘self-evident truths’.

For Reid, *all our knowledge* rests upon first principles; “This is as certain as that every house must have a foundation.” (EIP, 558)
Identifying First Principles

How do we work out which truths are self-evident? *Empirically.*

(1) Statements that contradict first principles are not only false but *absurd.* By observing which statements are absurd, we can identify the first principles which they contradict.

“to discountenance absurdity, Nature has given us a particular emotion, to wit, that of ridicule” (EIP, 567)

(2) We ought to observe statements or beliefs that are commonly agreed upon.

In particular, we should pay attention to the way that people use language.

“Language is the express image and picture of human thoughts; and from the picture we may draw some certain conclusions concerning the original [i.e. what people think]” (EIP, 573)
Common Sense

‘Sense’, for Reid, is a kind of judgement.

*Common* sense is a faculty of judgement that is possessed by all rational human beings (e.g. not infants or animals).

“that degree of judgement which is common to men with whom we can converse and transact business” (EIP, 520)

“There is a certain degree of it [judgement] which is necessary to our being subjects of law and government, capable of managing our own affairs, and answerable for our conduct towards others.” (EIP, 522)

Possessing the faculty of common sense is part of what it means to be a human being; it is part of our *natural constitution*.
Common Sense and First Principles

“All knowledge, and all science, must be built upon first principles which are self-evident; and of such principles, every man who has common sense is a competent judge, when he conceives them distinctly.” (EIP, 523)

• All knowledge must rest upon a foundation of first principles.
• Common sense is what makes it possible to identify these first principles.
• So, common sense is key to knowledge.

“the power of judging in self-evident propositions, which are very clearly understood, may be compared to the power of swallowing our food. It is purely natural and therefore common to the learned, and to the unlearned.” (EIP, 556)
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Some Common Sense First Principles…

“Who can doubt whether men have universally believed the existence of the material world?”

*Foundation of sciences (physics, chemistry, biology); metaphysics.*

“Who can doubt whether men have universally believed, that every change that happens in nature must have a cause?”

*Foundation of physics, dynamics, engineering.*

“Who can doubt whether men have universally believed, that there is a right and wrong in human conduct: some things that merit blame, and others that are entitled to approbation?” (EIP, 573)

*Foundation of ethics, law.*
Reid’s Philosophical Method

1. Empirical – observation and experience as key to knowledge.
2. ‘First principles’ – reasoning and knowledge should be based on a foundation of self-evident truths.
3. Common sense – a faculty that is innate to all human beings that allows us to identify self-evident truths.
4. Language – the structure of language (and what it implies) is evidence of the ‘first principles’ identified by common sense.

Language is the ‘data’ we use to make judgements concerning common sense (just like a physicist uses data to make judgements about the laws of nature).
Some Potential Concerns

If first principles are part of our natural constitution, why don’t we know them from birth? (via John Locke)

Why don’t we all agree on significant philosophical issues? (e.g. morality)

Is popular consensus really a mark of truth? (via Immanuel Kant)

If everyone became convinced the earth was flat, would that constitute evidence that ‘the flatness of the earth’ is a first principle? (We still talk about the sun ‘rising’.)
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Reid on Perception

Philosophy of perception:
• How do we encounter things in the world around us?
• How is it that what is going on in my mind is affected by the things in the world around me?
• What is the relationship between my sense organs (eyes, ears, nose etc.) and my sensations (colours, shapes, sounds, smells, feelings of softness/roughness/sharpness)?

Theories of perception are (usually) closely related to theories of knowledge – i.e. according to some philosophers, what I know depends on what I perceive.
Perception: a ‘naïve’ view
Perception: The ‘Way of Ideas’
The ‘Way of Ideas’

“the idea, or image of that object [e.g. the bell-tower] in the mind, is the immediate object, without which we could have no perception, no remembrance, no conception of the mediate object” (EIP 1.1.143)

• According to the ‘Way of Ideas’, what I perceive is an image or idea of the bell-tower which exists only in my mind.

• This image or idea is caused by the actual bell-tower itself which affects my sensory organs (eyes, ears etc.) in a certain way.

• My sensory organs send messages to my brain which in turn sends messages to my mind, and this is where the image or idea comes from.

Between me and the world there is a ‘veil of ideas’.
The ‘Way of Ideas’

What motivates the ‘Way of Ideas’?

- It doesn’t *seem* like I perceive (see, hear, touch, taste etc.) images or ideas in my mind; it seems like I perceive real things (bell-towers etc.).

- But Descartes showed that things are not always what they seem: there is (in some cases) a difference between (i) what really is the case, and (ii) what *seems* to be the case.

“How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events – that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed... As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep.” *Meditations on First Philosophy* (First Meditation)
Dreaming Illusions
Reid vs. the ‘Way of Ideas’

Arguments like the one put forward by Descartes are *rationally motivated*; they are motivated by reason and inference, rather than observation.

(i) What I perceive is not the same as what exists.
(ii) If what I perceive is not the same as what exists, something else must exist (i.e. what I perceive).
(iii) Therefore, something else must exist.

*That something else is an idea or image in the mind.*

Conclusion: ideas or images in the mind *must* exist in order to *explain* what I perceive in dreaming cases (for example).

Reid takes from this that ideas are *explanatory posits*.

Reid doesn’t like explanatory posits: they contradict the Newtonian rule (‘I feign no hypotheses’).
Reid vs. the ‘Way of Ideas’

‘I see the bell-tower’
‘Je vois le clocher’

This commits me to:
(i) “a mind that thinks” (‘I’) (‘Je’)
(ii) “an act of the mind” (‘see’) (‘vois’)
(iii) “an object which we think about” (‘the bell-tower’) (‘le clocher’)

BUT “besides these three, the philosopher conceives that there is a fourth – to wit, the idea, which is the immediate object.” (EIP 1.1)
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Reid’s “major philosophical contribution”

Since ideas or images in the mind are not the result of experience or observation (no scientific study would lead you to conclude that ideas exist), and since they conflict with a common sense first principle, Reid concludes that ideas are “mere fictions”.

The ‘Way of Ideas’ explanation of how perception works is a fictional story.

Reid himself is left with a direct realist theory of perception: I directly perceive real things.

“In a word, perception is most properly applied to the evidence which we have of external objects by our senses” (EIP 1.1)

i.e. not ideas.
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Reid thinks that *moral philosophy* should also be approached in the same way as mathematics or science.

Morality is no exception to the correct methods of gaining knowledge and doing philosophy; we should take an *empirical* approach.

Two ways of approaching morality empirically:

1) “by observing what we approve, and what we disapprove, in other[s], whether our acquaintance, or those whose actions are recorded in history”

2) “by reflecting often, in a calm and dispassionate hour, on our own past conduct, that we may discern what was wrong, what was right, and what might have been better” (EAP, 371)

*Morality is a kind of science.*
Moral First Principles

“Morals, like all other sciences, must have first principles, on which all moral reasoning is grounded.” (EAP, 369)

There are two kinds of first principle:

(i) more general principles
(ii) more particular principles

Both are self-evident.

“I propose, therefore… to point out some of the first principles of morals, without pretending to a complete enumeration.” (EAP, 370)
Some General Moral Principles

“There are some things in human conduct, that merit approbation and praise, and others that merit blame and punishment: and different degrees of either approbation or of blame, are due to different actions.” (EAP, 370)

There are moral rights and wrongs; actions deserve praise or blame.

“What is in no degree voluntary, can neither deserve moral approbation nor blame.”

Agency is required for moral responsibility.

“What is done from unavoidable necessity may be agreeable and disagreeable, useful or hurtful, but cannot be the object either of blame or of moral approbation.”

Agency (freedom) is required for moral responsibility.
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Some Particular First Principles

“We ought to prefer a greater good, though more distant, to a less; and a less evil to a greater”

Reid is not a hedonist but he does acknowledge that following what gives you pleasure can contribute to appreciating virtue.

“As far as the intention of nature appears in the constitution of man, we ought to comply with that intention, and to act agreeably to it”

Human nature will lead us to act virtuously.

“In every case, we ought to act that part towards another, which we would judge to be right in him to act towards us, if we were in his circumstances and he in ours” (EAP, 375)

Cf. ‘the Golden Rule’; an example where consensus implies common sense which implies a first principle.
Morality and Common Sense

“From the principles above mentioned, the whole system of moral conduct flows so easily, and with so little aid of reasoning, that every[one] of common understanding, who wishes to know their duty, may know it.” (EAP, 379)

*Moral principles are available to anyone with the faculty of common sense.*

Admittedly, some cases are more complicated than others:

“There are some intricate cases in morals which admit of disputation; but these seldom occur in practice; and when they do, the learned disputant has no great advantage: For the unlearned man, who uses the best means in his power to know his duty, and acts according to his knowledge, is inculpable in the fight of God and man. He may err, but he is not guilty of immorality.”
Morality and Common Sense

For example, complicated ‘trolley problems’.

Reid’s point:

1) Firstly, such cases, which require a lot of ‘moral theory’ to decipher, are extremely unlikely to happen.

2) Secondly, the ‘learned person’ (e.g. the ethicist) is (in the event of such cases happening) no better equipped to do the right thing than the person who simply follows common sense.

Question: does ethics actually help in these cases?

Reid: moral theories help us to organise/ categorise our moral obligations, but the answers (first principles) are always self-evident to common sense.

It is a mistake to think that “in order to understand [one’s] duty, [one] must needs be a philosopher and a metaphysician” (EAP, 386)
To conclude…

All in all, the picture that we get from Reid’s philosophy is one of remarkable consistency and conviction. Reid is convinced that philosophy (ethics, perception, etc.) is on a par with any other ‘science’, and thus that the same rules apply. Observation and evidence are key and ought to be the source of any conclusions we draw – no hypotheses should be feigned. Reid also displays a strong faith in human nature. We might still question whether it’s really plausible that there are self-evident truths in morality (for example) in light of widespread disagreement.

But if nothing else, Reid’s emphasis on common sense is not easy to shake off: how often in philosophy do we appeal to intuition? And how different are our intuitions from a set of common sense principles?