

THOMAS REID'S THEORY OF PERCEPTION

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### I. Introduction:

Thomas Reid (1710-96) was a contemporary, critic, and an admirer of David Hume (1711-1776).<sup>1</sup> Sometimes described as “the Scottish Kant,” Reid rejects the theory of representation that finds its origin in Descartes, developed by John Locke, and

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, in 1763 there was letter correspondence between David Hume and Thomas Reid. In response to Hume's comments, Reid makes the following statements:

...your opinion of my performance: and you have been pleased to communicate it directly in so polite and friendly a manner, as merits great acknowledgements on my part. Your keeping a watchful eye over my style, with a view to be of use to me, is an instance of candour and generosity to an antagonist, which would affect me very sensibly, although I had no personal concern in it, and I always shall be proud to show so amiable an example. Your judgment of the style, indeed, gives me great consolation, as I was very diffident of myself in regard to English and have been indebted to Drs. Campbell and Gerard for many corrections of that kind.

In attempting to throw some new light upon those abstruse subjects, I wish to preserve the due mean betwixt confidence and despair. But whether I have any success in this attempt or not, I shall always avow myself your disciple in metaphysics. I have learned more from your writings in this kind, than from all others put together. Your system appears to me not only coherent in all its parts, but likewise justly deduced from principles commonly received from philosophers; principles which I never thought of calling in question, until the conclusions you draw from them in the *Treatise of the Human Nature* made me suspect them. If these principles are solid, your system must stand; and whether they are or not, can be better judged after you have brought to light the whole system that grows out of them, than when the greater part of it was wrapped up in clouds and darkness. I agree wit you, therefore, that if this system shall ever be demolished, you have a just claim to a great share of the praise, both because you have made it a distinct and determined work to be aimed at, and have furnished properly artillery for the purpose [William Hamilton, *The Works of Thomas Reid*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Elibron Classics, 2005), 1:91].

reformulated by David Hume.<sup>2</sup> The theory of representation or ideas basically states we can only perceive our own ideas (whether causal theory of perception or representative theory of perception).<sup>3</sup> The objects in the external world stimulate sense data but we are never directly aware of the external or public objects themselves [see chart on representational theory of perception; **appendix 1**]; the objects are distinct from ideas with the ideas of them arising in our minds. The implication of this view is skepticism for the sensory elements are viewed as standing between us and the external world as a “*veil of perception*.”<sup>4</sup> Reid also rejected George Berkeley’s idealism because his philosophical project rejects the existence of a real world by believing that physical objects are simply a “*bundle of ideas*” [see chart on idealism; **appendix 2**]. In response to both the theory of perception as advanced by Locke and Hume and Berkeley’s idealism, Reid develops an alternative epistemology and a philosophy of mind whereby he argues that the mental faculties are essentially capable of giving us immediate contact with reality (mind-independent reality as opposed to mind-dependent reality).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John Haldane, “Thomas Reid: Life and Work” in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. LXXIV no. 3 (Summer 2000), 317; Daniel Kolak and Garrett Thompson, *The Longman Standard History of Modern Philosophy* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006), 100. In his article, “The Scottish Kant? A Reassessment of Reid’s Epistemology,” T. J. Sutton concludes that there are some notable similarities between Kant and Reid (e.g., both are reacting to skepticism by reading Hume; Kant’s idealism finds parallel in Reid; both are foundationalists; both share the same anti-skeptical strategy) [*The Philosophy of Thomas Reid*, ed. by Melvin Dalgarno and Eric Matthews, Philosophical Studies Series 42 (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 159-92. In his work, *On Reid*, Peimin Ni claims the ethical similarities between Kant and Reid are abundant [(Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth, 2002), 71-2].

<sup>3</sup> Antony Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, rev. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979, 1984), 264.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 367.

<sup>5</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Powers of the Human Mind*, 104. Interestingly, Reid offers an interesting viewpoint of Berkeley. He writes:

The bishop shows a timidity of engaging such an adversary, as a primary and universal opinion of all men. He is rather fond to court its patronage. But the philosopher intrepidly gives a defiance to this antagonist [Hume], and seems to glory in a conflict that was worthy of his arm. *Optat aprum aut fulvum descendere monte leonem*. After all, I suspect that a philosopher, who wages

The focus of this paper is twofold: conceptualize Reid's theory of perception (which he hoped would satisfactorily offer an alternative to the empirical theory of perception) and explore three ways he is able to justify his theory. A conclusion will follow.

## **II. Reid's Theory of Perception:**

In this portion we will begin by framing the present debate regarding Reid's notion of realism. Then we will specifically examine Reid's theory of perception, including his view of original and acquired perceptions, primary and secondary qualities, and natural and artificial signs. Then before we turn to the third section of the paper whereby we will consider three possible ways Reid is able to justify his theory of perception, we will determine what it means for him to "*warrant belief*."

Nicholas Wolterstorff acutely observes that most of Reid's thought revolves around the following two questions:

What accounts for the fact that we get entities in mind such a manner as to be able to form beliefs and other modes of thought about them, and to speak about them? In particular, what accounts for the fact that we get nonmental entities in mind in such a manner, and experienced events from the past? And secondly, what accounts for the fact that often we do not merely entertain thoughts about the entities we have in mind but form beliefs about them?<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, Thomas Reid's answers to these questions foster interpretative debate.

While Reid is traditionally understood to be a direct realist, scholars differ on what *type* of a direct realist he was.

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war with this adversary, will find himself in the same condition as a mathematician who should undertake to demonstrate, that there is no truth in the axioms of mathematics [Idem].

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Wolterstoff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 4.

*Realist debate.* Direct realism is essentially the theory that “perceiving is epistemically direct, unmediated by conscious or unconscious inference.”<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Copenhaver, Antony Flew, and Peimin Ni argue claim Reid is committed to epistemic directness whereby if one perceives object X, then the content of that perceptual awareness is object X. There is no need for an intermediate object in order to perceive or think about something.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Nicholas Wolterstorff contends that Reid did not hold a direct realist theory if one defines a direct realist theory as above. Rather, Wolterstorff contends that Reid was a mediated direct realist. He attempts to demonstrate this argument by showing that Reid did not believe one is acquainted with objects in perception, for if he did, then he would have been face with an insurmountable problem: a conflict between an awareness of objects in perception and his theory that sensations are signs (which indicate and inform us of objects). If sensations are signs, then his theory would have been doubly presentable.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. by Robert Audi, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 1999), 237.

<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Copenhaver, “Thomas Reid’s Direct Realism,” in *Reid Studies: An International Review of Scottish Philosophy* vol. 4 (Autumn 2000): 17-34; Peimin Ni, *On Reid*, Wadsworth Philosopher Series (Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth, 2002, 17-27; Antony Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, revised 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1979), 301.

<sup>9</sup> In “Thomas Reid’s Account of the Objectivated Character of Perception,” Wolterstorff offers some interesting textual evidence for his view. Consider the following from Reid’s *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*:

The external senses have a double province; to make us feel, and to make us perceive. They furnish us with a variety of sensations, some pleasant, others painful, and others indifferent; at the same time they give us a conception, and an invincible belief of the existence of external objects. This conception of external objects is the work of nature. The belief of their existence, which our senses give, is [also] the work of nature; so likewise is the sensation that accompanies it. This conception and belief which nature produces by means of the senses, we call perception. The feeling which goes along with the perception, we call sensation [*The Works of Thomas Reid*, 1:318].

Wolterstorff offers another interesting passage by Reid:

Nevertheless, Copenhaver also textually and systematically argues that Reid was a direct realist. She claims Reid viewed sensations as signs of relations which they bear to another in the perceptual process; they do not have intrinsic character.<sup>10</sup> “Thus, the representational content of perceptual experience is single, afforded only by perception and not by sensation.”<sup>11</sup>

Though there are technical and perhaps trivial differences of opinion whether he was a direct or mediated direct realist, Reid’s study of Hume’s writings convinced him to offer an alternative to the view that the immediate object of thought is always some impression or idea.<sup>12</sup> Instead he offers a type of direct realism, a blend of both cognitive

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...kind of sign may be said to be the medium by which I perceive or understand the thing signified. The sign by custom, or compact, or perhaps by nature, introduces the thought of the thing signified [Ibid., 1:278].

From these passages and others Wolterstorff concludes:

The conclusion has to be that when Reid says that, in perception, the external entity is the immediate object of the act of perceiving, he is not saying that in the totality of what goes on in perception, there’s no mediation of any sort between object and perception thereof; the sensation is a medium of sorts. What he is saying is that one’s conception of the external object, through suggested by the sensation, is not itself a mediated concept.... Reid was not of the view that in perception we enjoy Russellian acquaintance with external objects.... Reid, was not, in that way, a direct realist-though he was a direct realist in the sense that he did not think our apprehension of external objects in perception occurs by way of acquaintance with some mental particular which ‘represents’ the object [“Thomas Reid’s Account of the Objectivated Character of Perception,” 11-2].

<sup>10</sup> Copenhaver, ‘Thomas Reid’s Direct Realism,’ 18.

<sup>11</sup> Idem.

<sup>12</sup> In the dedication of his *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* Reid states:

I acknowledge, my Lord, that I never thought of calling in question the principles commonly received with regard to the human understanding, until the ‘Treatise of Human Nature’ was published in the year 1739. The ingenious author of that treatise upon the principles of Locke - who was no sceptic - hath built a system of scepticism, which leaves no ground to believe any one thing rather than its contrary. His reasoning appeared to me to be just; there was, therefore, a necessity to call in question the principles upon which it was founded, or to admit the conclusion.

But can any ingenious mind admit this skeptical system without reluctance? I truly not, my Lord; for I am persuaded, that absolute skepticism is not more destructive of the faith of the Christian than of the science of a philosopher, and of the prudence of a man of common understanding. I am persuaded, that the unjust live by faith as well as the just; that if all belief

psychology and epistemology, that presupposes a common-sense, immediate knowledge of the external world of material objects that flow from the belief in an internal cognitive view of the mind where properly basic operations of the mind arise from innate first principles. These innate principles of our human constitution are able to conceive the existence of external objects and their qualities; no justification is needed because they are self-evident in themselves without the result. One reason why is because our cognitive faculty is a gift of providential naturalism. Reid states that it would be “an unfavourable account of the workmanship of the Supreme Being, to think that he has given us one faculty to deceive us-to wit, our senses; and another faculty-to wit, our reason, to detect the fallacy.”<sup>13</sup>

*Perception.* Thomas Reid’s notion of perception of an external object of sense involves three characteristics: (1) Awareness of the object being perceived; (2) Belief in the existence of the object perceived. The more obvious is the perception, the more irresistible is the conviction; (3) the immediate acceptance of the object perceived. In other words, we do not have to debate, argue, or context the object of being perceived. Thus, the immediate authority of perception is realized.<sup>14</sup> We will now explore these three features of his theory of perception.

Perception, an act of the mind, involves not only involves the characteristics of awareness, belief, and acceptance of the object perceived, but also an awareness that

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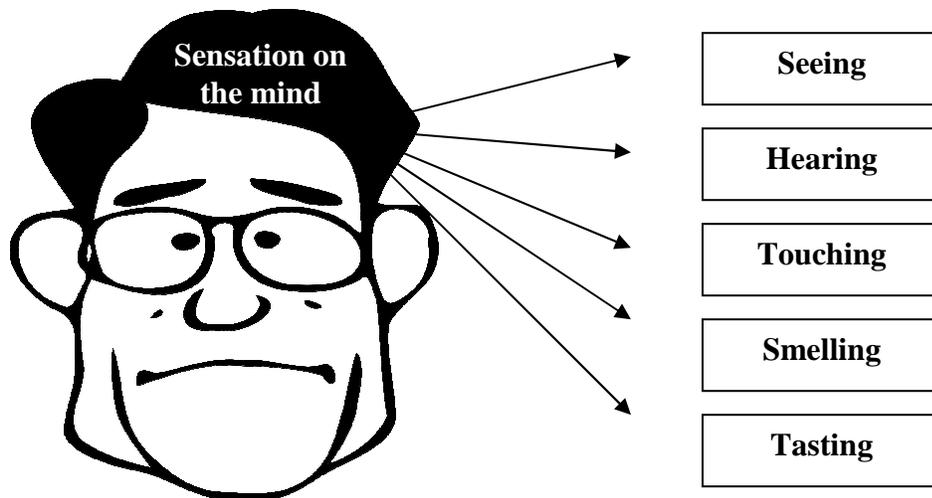
could be laid aside, piety, patriotism, friendship, parental affection, and private virtue, would appear as ridiculous as knight-errantry; and that the pursuits of pleasure, of ambition, and of avarice, must be grounded upon belief, as well as those that are honorable or virtuous [*The Works of Thomas Reid*, 1:95].

<sup>13</sup> *The Works of Thomas Reid*, 1:334.

<sup>14</sup> Ni, *On Reid*, 21.

*causes* us to have cognitive sensations. A sensation, for Reid, is simply the mental consequence of the influence of the object being perceived. Reid states, "...in sensation, there is no object distinct from the act of the mind by which it is felt; and this holds true with regard to all sensations."<sup>15</sup> In fact, Reid later asserts:

Sensation, taken by itself, implies neither the conception nor belief of any external object. It supposes a sentient being, and a certain manner in which that being is affected, but it supposes no more. Perception implies an immediate conviction and belief of something external; something different both from the mind that perceives, and from the act of perception. Things so different in their nature ought to be distinguished; but by our constitution that are always united. Every different perception is conjoined with a sensation proper to it. The one is the sign, the other the thing signified. They coalesce in our imagination. They are signified by one name, and are considered as one simple operation. The purposes of life do not required them to be distinguished.<sup>16</sup>



In fact, Reid argues that philosophers have not adequately properly distinguished sensations from perceptions.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the sensations of the mind are both active and passive unlike the idealists who only affirm the mind to be passive.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Powers of the Human Mind* (Glasgow: London, 1827), 118.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, ed. Derek Brookes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 72.

Reid does not believe that perception directly or indirectly presents ideas. Rather, directly associated with an organ of sense (e.g., seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting), to conceive an object is to be aware of that object as the bearer of both a *particular property* and a particular *relational property*. Rather than concentrating on sensations, we tend to focus on material objects and their qualities themselves-for perception displays material objects.<sup>19</sup>

For example, I'm presently observing a tea infuser located in my large glass mug at the far end of my desk. The tea infuser possesses a particular property of heat because it is hot to the touch. The tea infuser also possesses a relational property for it is located at the far right corner of my desk. If I look away from the glass mug the object continues to exist.

Unlike perceptions, Reid believes sensations are not prone to error. He writes:

The appearance of things to the eyes always corresponds to the fixed laws of Nature; therefore if we speak properly, there is no fallacy in the senses. Nature always speakth the same language, and useth the same signs in the same circumstances; but we sometimes mistake the meaning of the signs, either through the ignorance of the laws of Nature, or through ignorance of the circumstances which attend the signs.<sup>20</sup>

He later states in his discussion of the fallacy of the senses:

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<sup>18</sup> Reid writes:

... Yet, I think they [Peripatetics] come nearer to the truth, in holding the mind to be in sensation partially passive and partly active, than the moderns, in affirming it to be purely passive. Sensation, imagination, memory, and judgment, have, by the vulgar [ordinary people] in all ages, been considered as acts of the mind. The manner in which they are expressed in all languages shews this. When the mind is much employed in them, we say it is very active; whereas, if they were impressions only, as the ideal philosophy would lead us to conceive, we ought, in such a case, rather to say, that the mind is very passive; for, I suppose, no man would attribute great activity to the paper I write upon, because it receives variety of characters [*The Works of Thomas Reid*, 1: 114].

<sup>19</sup> Copenhaver, "Thomas Reid's Direct Realism," 31.

<sup>20</sup> *The Works of Thomas Reid*, 1:194.

It is impossible that there can be any fallacy in sensation: for we are conscious of all our sensations, and they can neither be any other in their nature, not greater or less in their degree that we feel them. It is impossible that a man should be in pain, when he does not feel pain; and when he feels pain, it is impossible that his pain should not be real, and in its degree what it is felt to be; and the same thing may be forgot when it is past, but when it is present, it can be nothing but what we feel.

If there, there be any fallacy in our senses, it must be in the perceptions of external objects...<sup>21</sup>

Let's return to my original example. I stand up from my armchair in my study and walk away from the glass mug of organic green tea. Poised at a certain location in my study I perceive the metal tea infuser in my glass mug to be bent. My perception that the tea infuser appears to be bent is not wrong. But if I willfully judge the tea infuser to be bent, then I make a mistake, if in fact, the tea infuser is found not to be bent. Nevertheless, I know that the tea infuser is not bent even though it appears to be. The reason why I determine that the tea infuser is not bent is because this is not an *original* perception (first account) but an *acquired* perception; I've had past experiences and knowledge regarding the illusionary effect of cylindrical items partially emerged in water.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast, Reid uses the following example to describe an original perception:

Thus, when I grasp an ivory ball in my hand, I have a certain sensation of touch. Although this sensation be in the mind and have no similitude to anything

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 1:335.

<sup>22</sup> Interestingly Reid states that "there is no fallacy in the original perception, but only in that which is acquired by custom" [Ibid., 1:332]. Peimin Ni observes:

Some thought that Reid misused the word 'perception for sensation in this passage, because perceptions are no immune to error ... But in my opinion, Reid did not form out of this particular case the universal conclusion that no original perception is liable to error. It is therefore not sufficient for us to say Reid misused the word. However, it is an interesting question indeed as to whether or not such a universal conclusion can be made [On Reid, 23].

material, yet, by the laws of my constitution, it is immediately followed by the conception and belief, that there is in my hand a hard smooth body of a spherical figure, and about an inch and a half in diameter. This belief is grounded neither upon reasoning, nor upon experience; it is the immediate effect of my constitution, and this I call original perception.<sup>23</sup>

In acquired perception, the sign may be either a sensation, or something originally perceived. The thing signified, is something which, by experience, has been found connected with the sign.<sup>24</sup>

To be sure, acquired perceptions are cultivated by care of their natural state (i.e., “medical faculty”), accurate attention to the objects of sense by improving our senses (like the artist who practices), instruments (e.g., glasses), and discovery of the connections which nature has established between sensible objects and their subtle qualities.<sup>25</sup>

Lastly, Reid believes that *natural signs* do not depend upon habit or custom.

Rather, they are understood by the constitution of our minds.<sup>26</sup> In fact, natural signs involve three classes.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 1: 332.

<sup>24</sup> Idem. On acquired perception Reid continues with the example of the ivory ball. He writes:

Thus, when the ivory ball is placed before my eye, I perceive by sight what I before perceived by touch, that the ball is smooth, spherical, of such a diameter, and at such a distance from the eye; and to this is added the perception of its colour. All these I perceive by sight, distinctly and with certainty. Yet it is certain from principles of philosophy, that, if I had not been accustomed to compare the informations of sight with those of touch, I should not have perceived those things by sight. I should have perceived a circular object, having its colour gradually more faint towards the shaded side. But I should not have perceived it to have three dimensions, to be spherical, to be of such linear magnitude, and at such a distance from the eye. That these last mentioned are not original perceptions of sight, but acquired by experience, is sufficiently evident from the principles of optics, and from the art of painters, in painting objects of three dimensions, upon a plane which has only two. And it has been put beyond all doubt, by observations recorded of several persons, who having, by cataracts in their eyes, been deprived of sight from infancy, have been couched and made to see, after they came to years of understanding.

Those who have had their eyesight from infancy, acquire such perceptions so early that they cannot recollect the time when they had them not, and therefore make no distinction between them and their original perceptions; nor can they easily be persuaded that there is any just foundation for such a distinction [Idem].

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 333-4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 1:121. Reid states, “The difference betwixt these two signs [artificial and natural] lies only in this—that, in the first, the suggestion is the effect of habit and customs; in the second, it is not the effect of habit, but of the original constitution of our minds” [Idem].

The first class of signs are connected with the object signified are established by nature and discovered only by experience. For example, mechanics, astronomy, optics, gardening, chemistry, medicine are established by nature, discovered by experience/observation, and consequences deduced from them. This class may be summarized as “*an interpretation of nature.*”<sup>27</sup>

The second class is not only those natural signs established by nature but are discovered by a natural principle *without* reason or experience such as thoughts, purposes, and desires common to all humans. For example, “An infant may be put into fright by an angry countenance, and soothed again by smiles and blandishments [flattery]. A child that has a good musical ear, may be put to sleep or to dance, may be made merry or sorrowful, by the modulation of musical sounds.”<sup>28</sup>

Finally, the third class of natural signs are not directly observable but are dependent within us such as the sensation we experience suggest the existence of a mind or sentient being to which they belong. It is a “natural kind of magic, and at once gives us a conception and create a belief of it.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, what distinguishes right from wrong judgments is whether one has “*warrant*” to believe.

The term “*warranted belief*,” though perhaps coined and popularized by Alvin Plantinga, was conceptually derived from Reid. In his *Enquiry*, Reid states:

I think, in most cases, we measure the degrees of evidence by the effect they have upon a sound understanding, when comprehended clearly and without prejudice. Every degree of evidence perceived by the mind, produces a proportioned degree of assent or belief. The judgment may be in perfect suspense between two

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 1:121-22.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 1:122.

<sup>29</sup> Idem.

contradictory opinions, when there is no evidence for either, or equal evidence for both. The least preponderancy on one side inclines the judgment in proportion. Belief is mixed with doubt, more or less, until we come to the highest degree of evidence, when all doubt vanishes, and the belief is firm and immovable. This degree of evidence, the highest the human faculties can attain, we call certainty.<sup>30</sup>

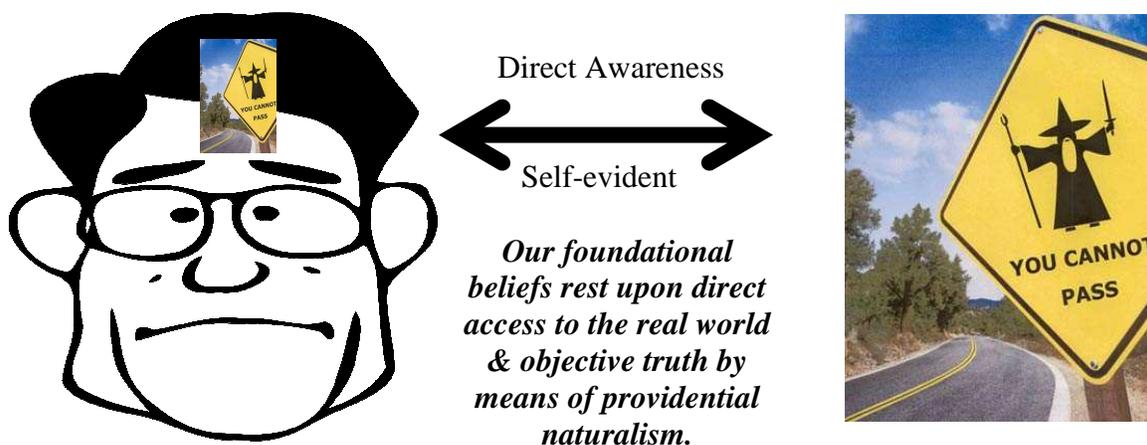
In another passage Reid states:

The common occasions of life lead us to distinguish evidence into distinguish evidence into different kinds, to which we give names that are well understood; such as the evidence of sense, the evidence of memory, the evidence of consciousness, the evidence of axioms, the evidence of reasoning. All men of common understanding agree, that each of these kinds of evidence may afford just grounds of belief, and they agree very generally in the circumstances that strengthen or weaken them.

Philosophers have endeavoured, by analyzing the different sorts of evidence, to find out some common nature wherein they all agree, and thereby to reduce them all to one ....

I confess that, although I have, as I think, a distinct notion of the different kinds of evidence above mentioned, and perhaps of some others, which it is unnecessary here to enumerate, yet I am not able to find any common nature to which they may all be reduced. They seem to me to agree only in this, that they are all fitted by nature to produce belief in the human mind; some of them in the highest degree, which we call certainty, others in various degrees according to circumstances.<sup>31</sup>

Consider the following diagram:



<sup>30</sup> *The Works of Thomas Reid*, 1: 482. Plantinga's criterion of warranted belief is summarized in the following propositional statement: 'A proposition P is properly basic for a person S if and only if P is either self-evident to S or incorrigible to 'S' ["The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology", *Christian Scholar's Review* 11 (1982): 187-98].

<sup>31</sup> *The Works of Thomas Reid*, 1: 328.

1. We see a thing for what it is; we have the capacity to recognize & categorize.
2. From many observations we develop a concept of what that thing is;
3. We learn to associate a term with our awareness of the object by use of senses, memory, consciousness, reasoning—all fitted together by nature to produce belief in the mind (original and acquired perception);
4. The object is indeed that kind of thing. We look to confirm what we had already seen.

Thus, in summary of this section, Reid's notion of perception involves a three-fold direct awareness: (1) simple seeing; (2) seeing as; (3) seeing that.<sup>32</sup>

For example, I have a direct awareness of the above street sign. This may be described as knowledge of acquaintance; I'm aware of this object. "*Simple-seeing*" comes before the formulation of a concept; it is seeing the object as it is. Thus, I'm not only consciously aware of what I've perceived but I have an irresistible conviction and belief in the existence of the object perceived because the object is clear and distinct in contrast to being indistinct. In fact, the conviction of this perception of this street sign is immediate; I'm not debating, speculating, or arguing against the perception of this object. Stated differently, the more distinct the object is before me, the more *irresistible* I find this perception of the object to be, hence, direct awareness. Reid states, "Perception commands our belief upon its own authority, and disdains to rest its authority upon any reasoning whatsoever."<sup>33</sup> "*Seeing as*" is the formulation of a mental judgment. For

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<sup>32</sup> I'm borrowing from memory these three categories (simple-seeing, seeing as, and seeing that) from a lecture on direct realism I heard J. P. Moreland give this past summer at the International Institute of Christian Studies in Kansas City, Missouri (2007).

<sup>33</sup> *The Works of Thomas Reid*, 1:259.

example, seeing “yellow” on the sign formulates a concept of yellow. Thus, I learn to associate the yellow with the word “sign” and develop a concept of what a yellow street sign is from many observations. Then “*seeing that*” is believing I have warrant or reasons for my belief. For example, I am able to pick out this street sign from among other street signs (e.g., one way road; stop sign; etc).

### **III. Three-Fold Justification for Reid’s Theory of Perception**

Following our introduction we began by examining what type of a direct realist Reid is. We then examined his theory of perception by considering Reid’s characteristics of perception, his view of original and acquired perceptions, primary and secondary qualities, and natural and artificial signs. We also explored what it means for Reid to “warrant belief.” We concluded that Reid’s notion of perception involves a three-fold direct awareness: (1) simple seeing; (2) seeing as; (3) seeing that. Now we are going to see how Reid is able to justify his theory of perception. In essence, Reid is able to appeal to three sources: natural providentialism, first principles of the mind, and the trustworthiness of faculties. We will proceed to examine these three sources of justification. A summary conclusion will follow.

*Natural Providentialism.* First, Reid is able to appeal to natural providentialism for his direct theory of perception. Reid states that our natural faculties are trustworthy and not fallacious because they are a gift from God. He writes, “Our intellectual Powers are wisely fitted by the Author of Nature for the discovery of truth, as far as suits our present state.” Later, he asserts, “The genuine dictate of our natural faculties is the voice of God, no less than what he reveals from heaven; and to say that it is fallacious is to

impute a lie to the God of truth.”<sup>34</sup> Even in his formal definition of common sense, Reid states that common sense is an “inward light or sense given by heaven to different persons in different degrees... it is common to all men with whom we can transact business, or call to account for their conduct.”<sup>35</sup> In fact, common sense is universal, given to all men, because it is the “gift of heaven”: “And where Heaven has not given it, no education can supply the want.”<sup>36</sup>

Notwithstanding, Keith Lehrer and Bradley contend that Reid does not depend upon theistic assumptions. Rather his justification depends upon the results of the first principles of the human mind. This argument is developed twofold. First, Lehrer substantiates his argument by appealing to textual evidence that states that our common sense beliefs are more easily felt than described. And second, the first principles of the mind assure us of the truth of beliefs, thus providing the basis and justification for them.

Considering the first proposal, Lehrer and Warner cite this unique passage from Reid:

We give the name of evidence to whatever is ground of belief. To believe without evidence is weakness which every man is concerned to avoid, and which every man wishes to avoid. Nor is it in man’s power to believe anything longer than he thinks he has evidence.

What this evidence is, is more easily felt than described. Those who never reflected upon its nature, feel its influence in governing their belief. It is the business of the logician to explain its nature, and to distinguish its various kinds

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 2:617.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 1:422.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 1:425. The context of this quote is worth noting:

These two degrees of reason [self-evident and judgment] differ in other respects, which would be sufficient to entitle them to distinct names.

The first is purely the gift of Heaven. And where Heaven has not given it, no education can supply the want. The second is learned by practice and rules, when the first is not wanting. A man who has common sense may be taught to reason. But if he has not that gift, no teaching will make him able either to judge of first principles or to reason from them [Ibid., 1:425].

and degrees; but every man of understanding can judge of it, and commonly judge's right, when the evidence is fairly laid before him, and his mind is free from prejudice. A man who knows nothing of the theory of vision may have a good eye; and a man who never speculated about evidence in the abstract may have a good judgment.<sup>37</sup>

On the other hand, Philip De Bary argues that Lehrer places undue emphasis on Reid's seventh first principle of contingent truths in *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*: "7. Another first principle is- That the natural faculties, by which we distinguish truth from error, are not fallacious."<sup>38</sup> Lehrer believes that this principle governs all other faculties.<sup>39</sup> Thus this principle has been termed "*the first first principle*" or "*metaprinciple*." However, Dr. De Bary agrees that this reading is incongruent with other evidences Reid offers.<sup>40</sup> If Lehrer is correct in his reading of Reid, then we simply have a case of "bad Reid."

I contend Lehrer and Warner's argument's argument lacks explanatory power in view of the number of passages where He mentions God as the Creator of our faculties. In fact, "*When we say of anything, that it is the work of Nature, this is saying that it is the work of God, and can have no other meaning [mine italics]*"<sup>41</sup> Or, "The wise and the

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<sup>37</sup> *The Works of Thomas Reid*, 1:328 cf. Keith Lehrer and Bradley Warner, "Reid, God and Epistemology" in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. LXXIV No. 3 (Summer 2000): 356-72.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:447; Philip De Bary, "Thomas Reid's Metaprinciple," in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. LXXIV No. 3 (Summer 2000): 373-83.

<sup>39</sup> Reid defines a faculty as follows:

I apprehend that the word faculty is most properly applied to those powers of the mind which are original and natural, and which make a part of the constitution of the mind [emphasis original] [*The Works of Thomas Reid*, 1:221].

<sup>40</sup> De Bary, "Thomas Reid's Metaprinciple," 382.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:615.

humble will receive it as a gift of Heaven, and endeavour to make the best use of it.”<sup>42</sup>

Therefore, I suggest that is textually reasonable to claim that Reid believes that both first principles of the mind and theistic origins both offer justification for Reid’s theory of perception. Consider the following:

We have, by our constitution, a natural conviction or belief, that we act freely—a conviction so early, so universal, and so necessary in most of our rational operations, *that it must be the result of our constitution, and the work of Him that made us...*If any one of our natural faculties be fallacious, there can be no reason to trust to any of them; for *He that made one made all* [mine italics]<sup>43</sup>

*Self-evident First Principles.* Another justification Reid is able to use to justify his theory of perception over and against Hume’s theory of ideas is his emphasis on first principles. Reid argues that everyone possesses self-evident, universal principles (though some may not recognize them as such), which are absolutely necessary for reasoning. In fact, to deny them is to go beyond the scope of reason. As such, these first principles are self-evident, need no other justification; they alone have explanatory power.<sup>44</sup> These first principles are given to us by God.<sup>45</sup> Reid writes:

Before we are capable of reasoning about testimony or authority, there are many things which it concerns us to know, for which we can have no other evidence. The wise Author of nature hath planted in the human mind a propensity to rely upon this evidence before we can a reason for doing so. This indeed, puts our judgment almost entirely in the power of those who are about us in the first period of life; but this is necessary both to our preservation and to our improvement. If children were so framed as to pay no regard to testimony or authority, they must, in the literal sense, perish for lack of knowledge. It is not more necessary that

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 1:330.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 2:617.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., *Intellectual Powers*, 230.

<sup>45</sup> *The Works of Thomas Reid*, 1:450.

they should be fed before they can feed themselves, than that they should be instructed in many things before they can discover them by their own judgment.<sup>46</sup>

He then states that as these faculties ripen we develop the ability judge. Then as we age we find our ability to judge to diminish and more and more reliance upon first principles.<sup>47</sup>

These first principles of the mind include both contingent and necessary truths. Contingent truths can be contrary whereas necessary truths cannot.<sup>48</sup>

The first set are contingent truths: (1) The belief that I really performs all the operations of the mind of which I am conscious (2); The thoughts of which I am conscious are indeed my thoughts; (3) What I distinctly remember did occur; (4) My own identity and continued existence is testified by memory; (5) What I do perceive by the senses actually does exist; (6) I have some degree of power over my actions and the determination of my will; (7) Our natural faculties, by which I am able to distinguish truth from error, is not fallacious;<sup>49</sup> (8) There is life and intelligence in fellow people.

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<sup>46</sup> Idem.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 1:450-1.

<sup>48</sup> Ni, *On Reid*, 33.

<sup>49</sup> This is the first principle Mike Lehrer considers to be “the first first principle.” In this section Reid makes some comments regarding Descartes and scepticism in general. These comments are important because they reveal the style of argumentation he chiefly uses in his rejection of the theory of ideas: *reductio* strategy. Nevertheless, I believe if Reid were alive to day he would not only have to deal with the skepticism that follows the theory of perception but he would have to contend with the skepticism that follows perspectivalism, conventionalism, differentialism, solipsism, and semantic progressivism. Reid writes:

If a sceptic should build his skepticism upon this foundation, that all our reasoning and judging powers are fallacious in their nature, or should resolve at least to withhold assent until it is proved that they are not, it would be impossible by argument to beat him out of this stronghold; and he must even be left to enjoy his skepticism.

Des Cartes certainly made a false step in this matter, for having suggested this doubt among others-that whatever evidence he might have from consciousness, his senses, his memory, or his reason, yet possibly some malignant being had given him those faculties on purpose to impose upon him; and therefore, that they are not to be trusted without a proper voucher. To remove this

Interestingly, Reid writes, “I believe the best reason we can give, to prove that other men are living and intelligent, is that their words and actions like powers of understanding as we are conscious of in ourselves.”<sup>50</sup> (9) Certain mannerisms such as non-verbal body language, countenance, and the sound of the voice, indicate certain thoughts and dispositions of the mind.<sup>51</sup> (10) There is a certain regard due to human testimony in matters of fact, and even to human authority in matters of opinion. Reid states that we put our judgment almost entirely in the power of others at the beginning stages of life for both preservation and improvement.<sup>52</sup> (11) There are many events depending upon the will of man, in which there is self-evident probability, greater or less, according to circumstances. Interestingly, Reid emphasizes the communitarian, political aspects of society whereby political reasoning is grounded; we place confidence in certain people to

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doubt, he endeavours to prove the being of a Deity who is no deceiver; when he concludes, that the faculties he had given him are true and worthy to be trusted.

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 not to be trusted in this instance without a voucher, why not in others? [*The Works of Thomas Reid*, 1:447].

Later in this same section he states:

We are born under a necessity of trusting to our reasoning and judging powers; and a real belief of their being fallacious cannot be maintained for any considerable time by the greatest sceptic, because it is doing violence to our constitution. It is like a man’s walking upon his hands, a feat which some men upon occasion can exhibit; but no man ever made a long journey in this manner. Cease to admire his dexterity, and he will, like other men, betake himself to his legs [*Ibid.*, 1:448].

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:449.

<sup>51</sup> He writes:

It seems to me incredible, that the notions of men have of the expression of features, voice, and gesture, are entirely the fruit of experience. Children, almost as soon as born, may be frighted, and thrown into fits by a threatening or angry tone of voice.... It is not necessary that a man have studied either music or the passions, in order to his feeling these effects. The most ignorant and unimproved, to whom nature has given a good ear, feel them as strongly as the most knowing [*Ibid.*, 1448-9].

<sup>52</sup> *Idem.*

govern us. Lastly, he states that “in the phenomena of nature, what is to be, will probably like to what has been in similar circumstances.”<sup>53</sup> Confirmed by reasoning, we have the conviction that the future will be like the past because nature is governed by fixed laws (e.g., regular laws of the universe). He differs with Hume for he believes but does not substantiate the point that this universal belief is not grounded upon antecedent reasoning but upon the constitution of the mind itself; it is a first principle.

Regarding necessary first principles of truth Reid contends that there has been no philosophical dispute. So, he divides them into different classes: sciences, mathematics, aesthetics (taste), morals, and metaphysics. Regarding science he lists (1) the structure of language is perceived without reasoning; (2) logical axioms such as the law of non-contradiction;<sup>54</sup> (3) mathematical axioms; (4) matters of taste (aesthetics);<sup>55</sup> (5) first principle of morals whereby he states (negative version of the “Golden Rule”):

An unjust action has more demerit than an ungenerous one: That a generous action has more merit than a merely just one; That no man ought to be blamed for what it was not in his power to hinder: That we ought not to do to others what we would think unjust or unfair to be done to us in like circumstances.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 1:451.

<sup>54</sup> Reid states:

There are *logical* axioms: such as, That any contexture of words which does not make a proposition, is neither true nor false; That every proposition is either true or false; That no proposition can be both true and false at the same time; That reasoning in a circle proves nothing; That whatever may be truly affirmed of a genus, may be truly affirmed of a genus, and all the individuals belonging to that genus [Ibid., 1:452].

<sup>55</sup> He claims:

I never heard of any man who thought it a beauty in a human face to want a nose, or eye, or have the mouth on one side. How many ages have passed since the days of Homer! Yet, in this long tract of ages, there never was found a man who took Thersites for a beauty.... In those operations of taste which are rational, we judge of the real worth and excellence of the object, and our love or admiration is guided by that judgment. In such operations there is judgment as well as feeling, and the feeling depends upon the judgment we form of the object [Ibid., 1:453].

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 1:453-4.

Having listed Reid's contingent and necessary self-evident principles it is apparent to me that his list distinction is perhaps questionable (e.g., aesthetics being placed as a necessary axiom). Nevertheless, Reid's justification for direct realism involves the presupposition that these beliefs are first principles which need no further justification. He writes, "They seem to me to agree only in this; that they are all fitted by Nature to produce belief in the human mind, some of them in the highest degree, which we call certainty, others in various degrees according to circumstances."<sup>57</sup>

Borrowing Lehrer and Warner's earlier notion of justification, Reid uses the first principles of the mind to assure us of the truth of beliefs, thus providing the basis and justification for a direct theory of perception. Even with that said, outside of those who embrace direct realism, the self-evident justification of first principles of the mind may not be sufficient, especially for the iterative skeptic.<sup>58</sup>

*Reliability of Cognitive Faculties.* The third element of justification Reid uses to support his theory of perception is the trustworthiness of our cognitive faculties. Since this argumentation is seen throughout these citations in this paper not much discussion is needed. We will examine his claims as it directly relates to his theory of perception and consider how he might answer some objections.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 1:328.

<sup>58</sup> Reid offers a strong response to the philosophical skeptic who questions first principles:

Indeed, with regard to first principles, there is nor reason why the opinion of a philosopher should have more authority than that of another man of common sense, who has been accustomed to judge in such cases. The illiterate vulgar [ordinary person] are competent judges; and the philosopher has no prerogative in matters of this kind; but he is more liable than they to be misled by a favourite system, especially if it his own [Reid, *Essays on the Powers of the Human Mind*, 320].

Having appealed to providential naturalism, cognitive faculties give rise to knowledge all by itself that are self-evident Reid turns to the methodology that is perhaps the cornerstone of his criticism against Hume's theory of ideas and the validation of his immediate theory of perception. In essence, Reid accuses his skeptical opponents like Locke and Hume of an inconsistency in their logic because in their arguments for a theory of ideas at some level they trust the faculties.<sup>59</sup> He writes:

Thus, the faculties of consciousness, of memory, of external sense, and of reason, are all equally the gifts of Nature. No good reason can be assigned for receiving the testimony of one of them, which is not of equal force with regard to the others. The greatest skeptic admits the testimony of consciousness, and allow that what it testifies is to be held as a first principle. If therefore they reject the immediate testimony of sense or of memory, they are guilty of an inconsistency.<sup>60</sup>

Not only is it logically inconsistent to claim that one cannot trust one's senses on the basis of senses, Reid argues that it is pointless if one cannot trust one's faculties-for it leads to a problem of infinite regress. Reid argues that one can never be confident of your premises, conclusion, or outlook since one cannot know things directly; he thinks this is a terrible position to be found. On the other hand, if the starting point is that one's faculties are trustworthy, which he believes is rooted in who we are as humans (common-sensical, a gift from God, and universal), then the individual can know some things immediately and directly without even having a criteria how he or she knows them. If the skeptic objects to Reid by argumentation, Reid challenges the person because he or she inadvertently relied on the trustworthiness of his or her faculties. He then uses their claims of skepticism upon their own claims (infinite regress problem).

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<sup>59</sup> John Greco, "Reid's Reply to the Skeptic" in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid*, ed. by Terence Cuneo and Rene Van Woudenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 134-55. Greco offers a comprehensive study of Reid's reply to skeptics.

<sup>60</sup> *The Works of Thomas Reid*, 1:463.

To be sure, his argumentation may still not satisfy those who argue that since we have been mistaken in the past, we can be mistaken in the present and in the future. Moreover, they may argue that in inductive knowledge, there is no guarantee that the truth of the premises secures a particular conclusion; it may merely support it. So, justification is weak, not strong. But Reid does not argue that he cannot be mistaken in a given judgment; he believes one can be fallible in one's judgments (hence warrant belief). Remember, he distinguishes sensations from judgments. Moreover, since Reid is a moderate foundationalist, he does not need Cartesian indubitability in order to have accuracy. In fact, he believes he is able to offer a position that avoids Cartesian indubitability, affirms common sense, first principles of logic (he wrote a small book affirming Aristotle's logic), and direct awareness with the affirmation that humans make fallible judgments. Reid's response would be that if we are fallible in our past perceptions, then we obviously and evidently know certain things.

In sum, Reid believes the skeptic like Hume faces a logical contradiction and an infinite regress problem by arguing for a theory of ideas. Reid states:

Ideas seem to have something in their nature unfriendly to other existences. They were first introduced into philosophy, in their humble character of images or representative of things and in this character they seemed not only to be inoffensive, but to serve admirably well for explaining the operations of the human understanding. But since men began to reason clearly and distinctly about them, they have by degrees supplanted their constituents, and undermined the existence of everything but themselves.<sup>61</sup>

#### **IV. Conclusion:**

Though it may be textually inconclusive whether Reid was a direct or mediated direct realist, we are certain that Reid's study of Hume's writings convinced him to offer an alternative to the view that the immediate object of thought is always some impression

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 1:109.

or idea. Thus, in this second section we examined Reid's theory of perception by considering the characteristics of perception and his notion of original and acquired perceptions, primary and secondary qualities, and natural and artificial signs. We also explored what it means for Reid to "warrant belief." We concluded that Reid's notion of perception involves a three-fold direct awareness: (1) simple seeing; (2) seeing as; (3) seeing that.

Then in the third section we thought about how he is able to justify his theory of perception by considering natural providentialism, first principles of the mind, and the trustworthiness of faculties. I argued that it is reasonable to claim that Reid believes that both first principles of the mind and theistic origins both offer justification for his theory of perception. Regarding the latter, Reid uses the first principles of the mind to assure his readers of the truth of beliefs, thus providing the basis and justification for direct theory of perception. Lastly, Reid justifies his theory of perception by arguing that Hume faces a logical contradiction and an infinite regress problem by arguing for a theory of ideas; Hume is unable to get off the ground for he is not able to trust his faculties. Reid, on the other hand, constructs a moderate foundational epistemology with no obligation to offer reasons for warranted beliefs (which is something taken up later by Plantinga and Wolterstorff with reformed epistemology).

We can probably sum up Reid's theory of perception and perhaps most of his philosophical project by the following statement he made in one of his many frequent discussions against Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume:

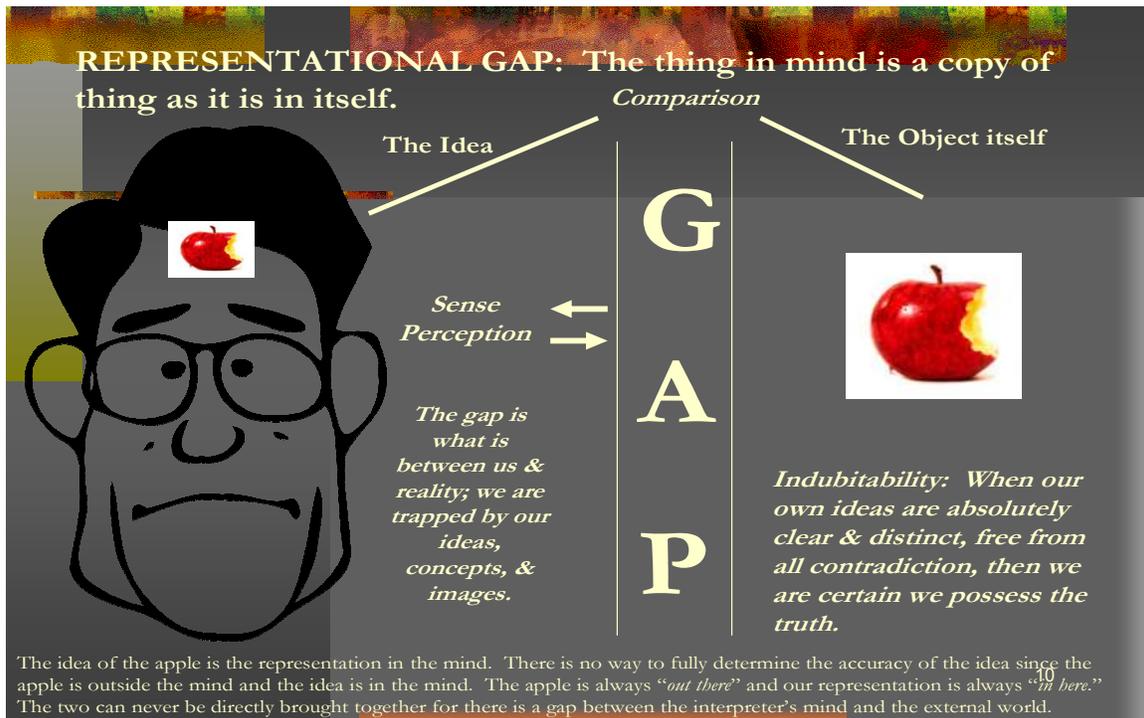
We cannot give a reason why we believe even our sensations to be real and not fallacious; why we believe what are conscious of; why we trust any of our natural faculties. We say, it must be so, it cannot be otherwise. This expresses only a strong belief, which is indeed the voice of nature, and which therefore in can we

attempt to resist. But if, in spite of nature, we resolve to go deeper, and not to trust our faculties, without a reason to shew that they cannot be fallacious, I am afraid, that, seeking to become wise, and to be as gods, we shall become foolish, and being unsatisfied with the lot of humanity, we shall throw off common sense.<sup>62</sup>

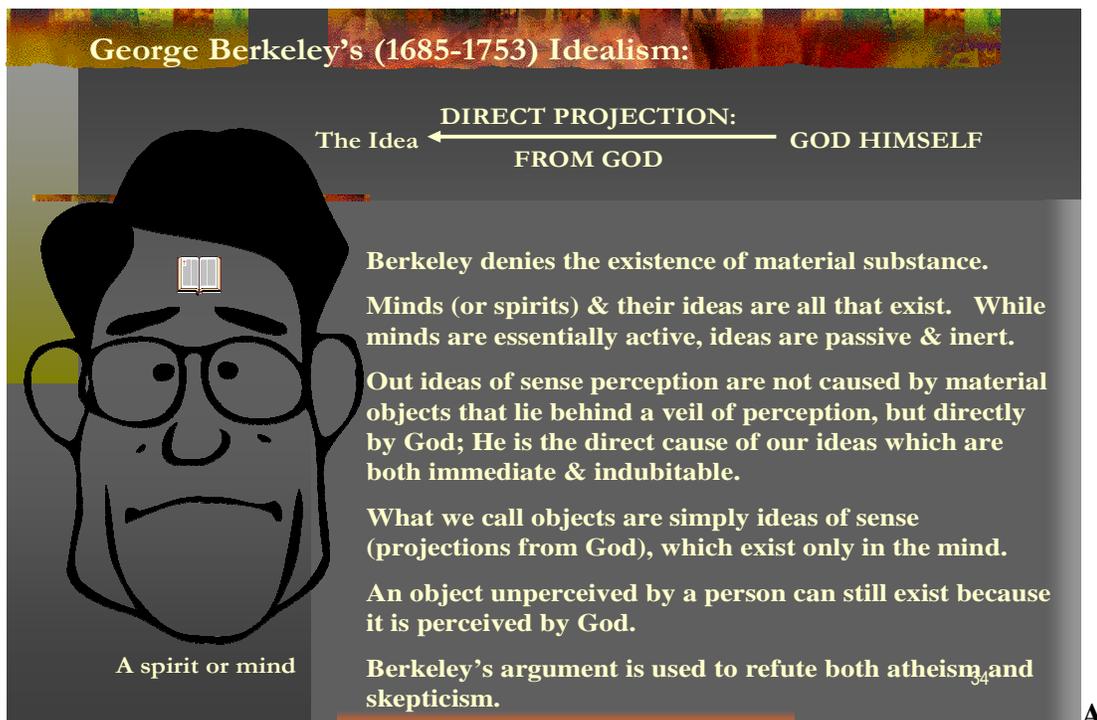
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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 1:455.

## Appendix 1:



## Appendix 2:



### Appendix 3:

#### SIGNIFICANT IDEAS BY THOMAS REID (1710-1796)

- Common sense is what we cannot help but believe because of the way we are constructed.
- Our construction assumes God as the Creator.
- Human nature is in conflict when common sense conflicts with beliefs.
- Dictates of common sense are associated with each other in such a way that conflicts of common sense do not occur.
- Common-sensical beliefs are justified by common sense.
- Alternatives to common sense reasoning are undermined because they are not common-sensical.
- Alternatives to common sense are morally wrong when they counter common-sense reasoning.
- We infer the nature of external objects from the features of directly perceived ideas.
- Lockean models of perception necessarily lead to skepticism or Berkeleyan Idealism.
- The immediate perception of object X is a mental object, an idea of object X.
- Perception involves both sensation and intuitively and self-evident known general truths/axioms/principles which together yield knowledge of external objects.
- These intuitive self-evident truths/axioms/general principles include moral principles.
- Since these self-evident truths/axioms/general principles are constitutive to humanity, they are universal.
- Syntactical features of language are universal for they are constitutive to humanity.