

The influence of  
thomas reid in  
philosophy and  
psychology  
philosophy essay



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This paper discusses how Thomas Reid was influential in psychology and philosophy. It talks about his works and his common sense philosophy. It discusses direct realism and his philosophical outlook on the theory of knowledge. Reid is also compared with David Hume and his ideas of skepticism. John Locke and Berkeley are also mentioned as influencing Reid's philosophy. He rejects Hume's arguments and publishes his own book about his own theories based on contradictions to Hume. He also gave lectures at different Universities that he worked at. Some of these lectures appear in his essays that he produces in his retirement. His common sense works show that we can perceive the world accurately through our senses and experiences with people are similar. And his essays talk about the reasoning and ideas that are not metaphysical in the world, but are real.

Thomas Reid was a Scottish philosopher during the 18th century whose most famous contributions to the philosophy of intellect are his common sense works, his rational thinking, and his criticisms of fellow British empiricists, particularly Hume. He defended the existence of reasoning powers and influenced many others, including American thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and faculty psychology.

Thomas Reid was born on April 26, 1710. His father, Lewis Reid, was a reverend for 58 years, and his mother, Margaret Gregory, lived a shorter life and died when Thomas was 22 in 1732. He came from a long line of intellectuals on both sides of the family that attended college. Reid had an older brother, David, who was five years apart and two younger sisters Isobel and Jane. He grew up in a rural area in a valley in Strachan just outside of Aberdeen on the north-east side of Scotland. This area also was the

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hometown of Immanuel Kant, who was another local philosophy celebrity during this time period and had a few parallels with Reid (britannica, 2011).

Reid started attending a small country school when he was ten years old, then transferred to Aberdeen Grammar School, a higher and more prestigious school, until 1722. He then left to go to Marischal College at age twelve which was a norm in the area and time period. Reid's granduncle, James Gregory, graduated college at the age Thomas started (Fraser, 1898).

George Turnbull was Reid's college philosophy professor for three years, and his influence had a large impact on Reid. Turnbull used much of Berkeley's philosophy in his teachings; this included his version of 'common sense': "Common sense is sufficient to teach those who think of the matter with seriousness and attention all the duties of common life; all our obligations to God and our fellow-men; all that is morally fit and binding" (Fraser, 1898). This meant that the spiritual facts of the mind cannot be ignored because of facts seen in the visible world, and what we call matter are only sensible ideas that come from us personally. These teachings influenced indirectly by Berkeley played an important role in Reid's life.

Thomas Reid studied theology from late 1726 to 1731 as per a requirement for the Church. This is one of the parallels with Kant and Reid; they are both theologically trained. After his completion of theology, Reid found a job as a librarian back at Marischal College in 1733, after his mother's death. Another Kant parallel was that he was a librarian after finishing college, but Kant got £10 yearly while Reid only got £9. While a librarian, Reid's undergraduate friend and then current Professor of Mathematics at Marischal, Stewart,

asked Reid to go with him on a tour of England in 1736. Other than this one particular instance, Reid, like Kant, did not travel far from his home for the rest of his life (Fraser, 1898).

After his job as a librarian, Reid was presented the position of pastoral charge of New Machar, a town near Aberdeen, upon his return home. This position was administrator of the church. There was a problem because of rural prejudice, which was influenced by a sermon in early 1737 by Rev. Bisset, which made Reid a victim to attacks and mistreatment when he got ordained later that year. Because of this sermon Reid was attacked because he was rural and not from a big city. Those who fought against him would come to change their opinions after his fifteen years there, to where they “ would have fought for him when he went away” (Fraser, 1898) .

Thomas got married in 1740, to his cousin Elizabeth, who was his Uncle Dr. George Reid’s daughter. With her he had six daughters and three sons, and one of the five daughters born in New Machar, died at not even a year old. His wife, in 1746, became critically ill and Reid’s religious side came out in some of his manuscripts, showing his devotion to god and his wife in his writings. His wife lived through her sickness but Reid eventually outlived everyone except one daughter, including his children.

When Thomas Reid was thirty-eight, a paper of his appeared in print called ‘ An Essay on Quantity.’ His 1748 paper revealed the attraction to mathematics that Reid had, using mathematical reasoning with ratios to explain moral philosophy. He argued “ that genuine ethical inquiry is concerned with a class of facts which are under a higher category, and

refuse to submit to geometrical measurement” (Fraser, 1898). This recognition of other scientific methods other than mathematics shows a change in thought for this time.

Reid’s most known work in philosophy, however, would come from an almost unnoticed book from London in 1739 by David Hume, who was exactly one year younger than Reid coincidentally. The “ Treatise of Human Nature” by Hume would eventually make headlines in shaping European thought and would give Reid an argument. Hume reasoned that there should be a new system of sciences to prove that there is neither human nature nor science in the world, and that nothing can be true if you cannot logically reason from our senses. He believed that our impressions of our senses was exactly that, impressions which tended to be temporary and perceived differently from person to person, and therefore there cannot be truth since impressions are not universal. He also went on to say that what we call ‘ existence’ is only felt impressions, that time is an illusion, and that the word ‘ identity’ is nothing since a person is nothing more than an idea at the moment. To sum it all up, only current feelings exist in the universe.

Reid took this as almost an insult. These ideas degraded our speech and communication to only abstract adjectives, because nouns and verbs don’t truly exist. Because of this conclusion, we cannot communicate what doesn’t exist because you can’t communicate only through adjectives. It was a ‘ philosophical suicide’ that gave us an unknown universe we couldn’t trust, because the skeptics at this time were saying that nothing exists, like David Hume. Reid began his own theory from these insults, starting with our senses and focusing on mathematical theory. The foundations of <https://assignbuster.com/the-influence-of-thomas-reid-in-philosophy-and-psychology-philosophy-essay/>

mathematical abstracts are in mathematical axioms, and “ so the foundations of all concrete reasoning are to be found in the rational constitution of perception through the five senses” (Fraser, 1898). Forty years after that, Reid even went on to say that it was Hume that made him realize the faults of the Berkeley system that came from Descartes’ philosophy. He stated that what George Turnbull taught, “ gave me [Reid] more uneasiness than the want of a material world,” and “ to question its foundation” (Reid, 1785). Hume gave Reid an argument and showed him that he should create his own theory.

Thomas Reid left New Machar in late 1751, where he became a regent master at King’s College in Aberdeen till 1764. There he gave lectures, and the three-year regent course was still imposed for philosophy. He gave lectures in natural history and physical science one year, mathematics and natural philosophy in another, and finally philosophy of the mind in the third year, where the same students were still under his teachings. So, he had three three-year classes which he taught: 1753-56, 1756-59, 1759-62, plus the first two years when he started. Under some examination of Reid’s lectures in the Natural Philosophy classes, it was shown that he was very much knowledgeable in physical sciences incorporating laws of motion, astronomy and electricity.

Reid also brought changes and reform to the university. Teaching sessions were extended by two months, there was much better organization in Latin classes, and material sciences had to be a prerequisite to psychology and ethics, which was consistent with a mind naturally observing then reflecting upon its observations. He also created the ‘ Wise Club’ at King’s College, <https://assignbuster.com/the-influence-of-thomas-reid-in-philosophy-and-psychology-philosophy-essay/>

which was a small society for philosophical inquiry with his old friend Gregory. This club also influenced later Scottish philosophic literature. The meetings consisted of reading of personal short essays, as well as a question proposed before each meeting for discussion. It was mostly the skeptical theology that Hume talked about that gave the society discussion questions, and Reid went as far as writing “ If you write no more in morals, politics, and metaphysics, I am afraid we shall be at a loss for subjects” in a letter to David Hume (Craig, 1998).

Since the start of the Wise Club in 1758 continuing to his last work of the society in 1762, Reid put in many works that would be later seen in his publications two years afterwards. A lot of the work itself dealt with our senses and perception, and he even received an honorary Doctorate of Divinity from Marichal College in early 1762. By the end 1763, he produced his first book *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, which was the result of his twenty years in New Machar and Aberdeen.

The *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* was an argument against David Hume that allowed Thomas Reid to attain a very important role in the development of philosophy. In his book, he makes an important point about Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*. Reid argued that if we as humans have no evidence that things exist, then we could never encounter an external object directly, and what we perceive is in our own minds. How can one be sure of the outside realities that differ from one’s own sensations? Reid also said, “ If I allow that my own sensations and ideas are my only possible original data, I cannot from such transitory phantoms

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infer the real existence of other persons.” (Reid, 1764) This is also when Reid encountered Berkeley’s theory a dead end for proving other intelligent beings existence. Reid was also later criticized by John Stuart Mill, specifically in his common sense book. Mill said that “ any appeal to intuition or self-evidence was a cover way of promoting self-interest” (von Dehsen, 1999).

He argued further that if only sensations and ideas of the self cannot be broken through, then the ‘ self’ is an illusion and the word self means nothing. The universe is, not sensations that are all personal, but is put into isolated sensations which can be similarly experienced by others, but not the exact same sensations. Reid also found it unreasonable that we do not actually perceive external things and only certain images of them are imprinted in the mind called ‘ ideas’ and ‘ impressions’. He thought this could only throw out all philosophy, religion, and common sense.

These ‘ ideas’ are substitutions of the common reasonable sense, which neither requires nor admits of logical proof. Reid believed there two degrees of reason. The first degree of reason is the five senses “ to judge of things self-evident” (Reid, 1764). The second degree is reasoning, which is able to make conclusions of non-self-evident reasoning from the first degree. Also, truth in judgments of common sense cannot be seen, they are only justified by reasoning and how human nature responds to them. For example, we have the common sense that fire is hot because other people perceive it as hot and it comes through our senses. This is part of nature in human understanding, and is inspiration of God. Reasoning is used to control

everything from emotions to appetite, and allows us to live and serve under  
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God. " God has " excellently fitted" our conscience, reason, natural instincts and bodily appetites to the benefit of the species" (Yaffe & Nichols, 2009).

He continued to say that this is what makes up the discoveries in our reasoning of the world and called this the common sense of mankind, and even started the School of Common Sense. When one ignores these innate senses though, another may find them as being crazy. Reid also explained what if Hume found is right, and to not trust our senses: " I break my nose against a post that comes in my way, I step into a dirty kennel; and after twenty such wise and rational actions I am taken up and clapped into a madhouse" (Reid, 1764). Though people may not know if the senses are correct, everyone assumes they are because they are commonly known and perceived. Our common sense, to Reid, is conscious and varies between persons, time periods, and locations.

Reid listed six axioms that came from ' sensus communis', which was the term he used for common sense. The first is " that the thoughts of which I am conscious are thoughts of a being which I call myself, my mind, my person." The second is " that those things did really happen that I distinctly remember." The third is " that we have some degree of power over our actions, and the determination of our will." the forth is " that there is life and intelligence in our fellow men with whom we converse." the fifth is " that there is a certain regard due to human testimony in matters of fact, and even to human authority in matters of opinion." and the sixth is " that, in the phenomena of nature, what is to be, will probably be like what has been in similar circumstances" (Reid, 1785).

He concluded in his common sense philosophy four basic principles of knowledge. The first principle was that certain “ undemonstrable fundamental truths [are] immediately conclusive and absolute” and that there are certain truths that are common among people. The second principle was that these truths cannot be subjected to criticism or support from science. The third principle was that philosophy itself comes from “ self-enlightening truth” and anything that contradicts your truth is incorrect. The fourth truth was that our morality is what we use as guidelines in our life to perform our duties in society and we act with what goes with common sense and what we think is right (Reid, 1764).

Thomas Reid, before the book was published, wanted David Hume to read some of it. Hume responded with a compliment saying it was deeply philosophical yet written with spirit, and that no one else is able to explain themselves with greater clarity. However he kindly disagreed with the abstract that was sent. Reid wrote back saying that he was only attempting to shine a little light on the subject, “ But whether I have any success in this attempt or not, I shall always avow myself your disciple in metaphysics” (Reid, 1872). He also concluded that he learned more from Hume than everybody else known put together in the subject.

Shortly following his book, Reid was offered to be the Chair of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow when Adam Smith resigned in 1764. During his time of teaching in Glasgow College, the lectures that he provided would be the precursor of his published Essays of his old age. When 1772 came about, Reid had hardship in his personal life, when two of his older daughters died. When Reid was seventy, he discovered after sixteen years <https://assignbuster.com/the-influence-of-thomas-reid-in-philosophy-and-psychology-philosophy-essay/>

teaching at Glasgow, he found himself 'growing old.' In a letter he wrote to his friend Lord Kames he reported this and turned over the class to his assistant Archibald Arthur so he could continue his philosophical authorship in retirement. After his retirement in 1780, he again found tough times the same year. His eldest son died, and only two years go by only to be heartbroken once again by the death of his last son, which left only one daughter in his family.

Reid's final works were his Essays, which come in two parts, and were based off his lectures at Glasgow. The first installment was an inquiry of man's intellectual power, while the second came a few years afterward explaining the facts of moral power and the invisible ideas in man's consciousness. "In the Essays an advance is made towards a finally ethical interpretation of man and the universe."

The Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man was the first Essay to come out, in 1785. It explained our perception through the senses and memory, imagination, and sciences dealing with time frames. It also contained some rebuttal to the abstract reasoning criticism of common sense. He presents 'direct realism' which is the view that our minds are directly connected to the world, and that we experience objects immediately as objects because of our power of perception. This was the opposite thinking of consciousness being formed by adding sensations to our ideas. Reid started with an important part of all this: "Human knowledge may be reduced to two general heads, according as it relates to body or to mind; to things material, or to things intellectual (Reid, 1785)." Otherwise, we know that there are two worlds, mind and matter.

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In his essay Reid continued with, “ The Supreme Being intended, that we should have such knowledge of the material objects that surrounds us, as is necessary in order to our supplying the wants of nature, and avoiding the dangers to which we are constantly exposed; and he has admirably fitted our powers of perception to this purpose. [If] the intelligence we have of external objects were to be got by reasoning only, the greatest part of men would be destitute of it; for the greatest part of men hardly ever learn to reason; and in infancy and childhood no man can reason.” Also, he said that God conveys this intelligence of objects in a way we can understand and use the information. “ The information of the senses is as perfect, and gives as full conviction to the most ignorant, as to the most learned” (Reid 1785). This showed that Reid believed that reason could not be the prerequisite to perception and that god gave us the innate ability of perception through the senses to draw conclusions of the universe.

Three years after the first set of Essays, he put out the remaining works in 1788, titled Essays on the Active Powers of Man. This concluded the ideas that are not of the physical world including ethics. “ A man can act from motives that are higher than any that move the lower animals. He sees one course of action as having dignity and value, and another as being base and low; and lower animals can’t make such distinctions.” Reid explains our higher sensibility as humans and our moral values as a society are means to set us apart from animals. The Essay continues to show that our power, though we can’t perceive or be aware of it, is our mind’s reason. This is where Locke’s theory, that we gather ideas our ideas through the senses

and/or consciousness, “con→, icts with the fact that we have a conception or idea of power” (Reid 1785).

Another point he postulated was that for some things, we have a direct conception, while for others, we only have a relative conception. This can be possibly thought of as we have a direct conception of the third dimension since we live and experience it, but only a relative conception of the fourth. Reid’s hatred for Atheists and their reasoning in depriving man of all active power is also shown in this work, “They join hands with theologians in depreciating human understanding, so that they can lead us into absolute scepticism” (Reid, 1785). He also concludes that there can’t be an exclusion of our senses, memory, and rational faculties in any further theoretical opinion.

Reid discusses his early version of mental faculties as active powers of the mind that influenced ones thoughts and behavior. Also, faculties are innate and work together as one unifying mind, some of which included were attention, judgment, perception, and reason. There were 43 total faculties (Hergenhahn, 2009). Though this was not the actual school of thought that phrenologists believed later, it did however help influence faculty psychology.

Thomas Reid died when he was eighty-six, on October 7, 1796 in Glasgow. His most notable ideas for his recognition in the Scottish Enlightenment were direct realism and common sense. His works in metaphysics, epistemology or theory of knowledge, mind, and ethics, would come from the influences of David Hume, Cicero, Locke, and Berkeley. His Inquiry into the Human Mind

on the Principles of Common Sense would bring upon the Scottish School of Common Sense, and his works collectively would later influence those such as Victor Cousin, Alvin Plantinga, and C. S. Peirce.

I think he was quite important in the development of psychology. I think personally that rationalism is much more sane and reasonable than what Hume and the empiricists were saying that we can't trust our senses. However, I think its important sometimes to take a step back to take two steps forward and play devils advocate as what the skeptics were saying, otherwise we may not have seen Reid. He talks about the important issue of our senses being accurate and reasonable to trust even if they are slightly wrong. I also liked his essays more in his common sense work just because it explained our reasoning abilities and our ethics, which no one really talked about in that much depth. If we were to believe Hume we could basically say that we are living in a matrix since the only thing real is feelings and ideas in the mind. This is why Reid is important because he explains how objects are actually real and how we communicate about them. He helped influence faculty psychology and phrenology which opened up the door for specific areas of the brain such as reasoning, consciousness, and attention.