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A Complete Analysis of Thomas Reid and Common Sense Realism

Adam Kritz

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A Complete Analysis of Thomas Reid and Common Sense Realism

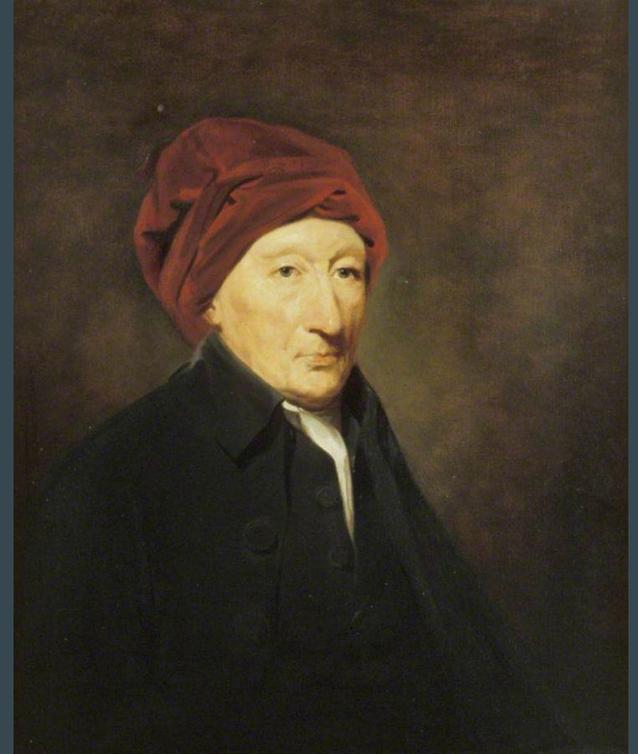


Adam Kritz

Honors Senior Capstone Project
Supervising Faculty: Michael Reno

Who was Thomas Reid?

- Scottish Philosopher, Lived 1710-1796
- Minister 1731-1752, Philosophy Professor 1752-1781
- Founder of common sense realism (CSR) in 1762 as a reaction to skepticism and Hume
- Reid's work has been under researched, misunderstood, and heavily criticized, both by Enlightenment philosophers and modern-day philosophers
- My work attempts to create a better understanding of Reid



Enlightenment Philosophy

- Enlightenment philosophy was dominated by rationalism and empiricism
- **Rationalism:** reason and intuition are the source of all knowledge
- **Empiricism:** experience is the source of all knowledge, Reid was an empiricist
- **Skepticism:** questions the certainty of knowledge
- Skepticism was popular in the Enlightenment period, appears in the works of Hume, Descartes, as well as other famous philosophers.
- Skeptics often doubted the existence of the physical world, doubted that our perceptions of the physical world match physical world objects, and doubted that causes and effects have an actual connection
- For example: when we perceive a chair, how do we know it actually exists in the physical world? How do we know the image of the chair in our minds looks the same as the chair outside of our minds?

An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense

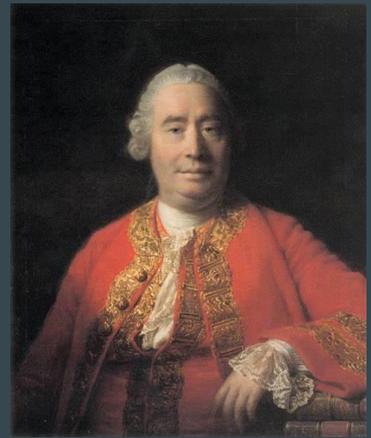
- Reid argues against skepticism in multiple ways in the *Inquiry*
- **Rose argument:** Reid claims that if he smells a rose, the rose must cause the sensation of smell he is experiencing. This is because a person cannot conjure the smell of a rose without a rose being present. The rose being present is the only thing that changes when the smell of a rose is experienced, so the rose must be the cause of the smell. This also means external objects must exist outside the mind.
- **Needle argument:** Reid presents the hypothetical of a blind man, who has never experienced touch, being poked with a needle. The blind man will be able to feel the needle. A blind man could not conjure this sensation from the mind as he has no previous concept of a needle. Therefore, there must be a physical object causing the poking sensation that the man feels.
- **Visible Figure argument:** Reid argues that the shape, size, and location of objects in the world can be confirmed by touch and sight. If an object looks a certain way, and touch confirms its physical properties, it must actually be that way in the physical world. Therefore, shape, size, and location can all be confirmed to be accurate.

An Inquiry continued

- **Probability argument:** Reid argues that there is no reason to believe the physical world is entirely false, as the chances of this being true are very small. Therefore, one should believe the physical world exists.
- **Three sanity arguments:** *One:* people cannot rid themselves of their senses even if they try, there is no purpose to try and see past the senses. *Two:* even if one could rid themselves of their senses, there is no purpose, they would have to live life the same way. *Three:* the senses have always kept people alive and safe, there is no reason to doubt them.
- **Conclusion of the *Inquiry*:** Reid presents a new philosophical system. He argues for a combination between direct realism, the belief that external objects perfectly line up with perceptions, and the representative theory, the belief that images in the mind do not necessarily line up with physical objects. He calls this common sense realism (CSR).

Hume and Kant

- David Hume (1711-1776) was the central focus of Reid's attack, and Reid knew him in real life, they were both Scottish
- However, Hume struggled to respond to the arguments in the *Inquiry* for a number of reasons, and instead dismissed them
- Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was a famous German philosopher who also attacked Reid
- However, Kant's attack was extremely cursory and not well researched
- Neither philosopher gave substantial criticism to Reid, but both hurt his reputation due to their fame



David Hume



Immanuel Kant

Dugald Stewart and Thomas Brown

- Dugald Stewart (1753-1828) was student of Reid's
- **Sided with Reid:** claimed that skepticism could be mentally harmful, used more practical arguments against skepticism
- Defined what should be viewed as common sense: anything that is impossible to attack or defend philosophically and there is no purpose in questioning it (i.e. the existence of food)
- Thomas Brown (1778-1820) was a student of Stewart's
- **Argued against Reid:** claimed Reid used similar words for different concepts, Reid's cause and effect argument was faulty, and common sense realism does not prove skepticism is logically false, only impractical



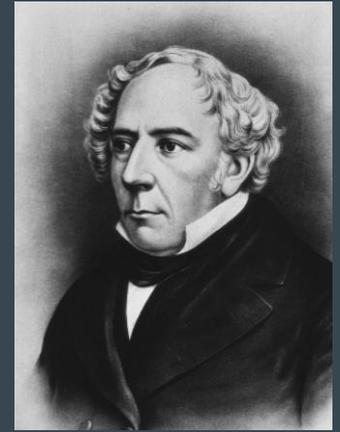
Dugald Stewart



Thomas Brown

William Hamilton and James Frederick Ferrier

- William Hamilton (1788-1856) was a later Scottish philosopher
- **Sided with Reid:** claimed that philosophy should only be the pursuit of things which can be understood. One should not concern themselves with the idea of a false physical world as it can never be proven
- However, he claimed that direct realism was more accurate than CSR, though there was functionally no difference between the two
- James Frederick Ferrier (1808-1864) was Hamilton's colleague
- **Argued against Reid:** claimed that perception was directly tied to matter, one cannot experience matter without perceiving it
- Argues that “matter is the perception of matter”
- Concluded that CSR and direct realism were different, and that Reid's work was actually entirely representative theory



William Hamilton



James Frederick Ferrier

Conclusions

1. Reid and Hume are often presented as opposites of each other, by Reid and by other philosophers, when this is actually not the case. Both had very similar ideas about skepticism and when it could be useful.
2. CSR should really be separated into two arguments, philosophical arguments and practical arguments. Philosophical arguments would include ones like the rose argument, while practical arguments would include those like the probability argument. It is easy to argue against a philosophical argument using a practical argument, and vice versa, which is why Reid's work was easy to attack and misunderstand.
3. CSR and direct realism are different. Often people assume Reid is a direct realist, when this is not the case. Scottish philosophy evolved to direct realism over time through those like Hamilton and Ferrier, but Reid was not a direct realist.
4. Reid is a fascinating philosopher who paved the way for Scottish philosophy for years, and should be studied more to better understand his work.

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