

The Epistemology of Thomas Reid

Derek R. Brookes

INTRODUCTION

One of Thomas Reid's primary objectives, throughout his career, was to refute the scepticism of David Hume. Early on, Reid felt that the source of this scepticism was a mistaken account of the mind and its operations; and that the only adequate response would therefore be to provide an alternative, correct account.¹ The implication of this claim is that Reid's work on the intellectual powers—memory, consciousness, imagination, judgment, reason, and so on—must be understood as part and parcel of his response to what is, essentially, a question about the possibility of knowledge.

But just how is an understanding of, say, the nature of memory connected with the question of what we can know? How could Reid's examination of the various intellectual powers serve as an answer to one who doubted the existence of the material world? To answer this we need to ask a quite contemporary question, namely, what is Reid's theory of knowledge? What conditions did he think would need to be satisfied before our beliefs might be granted the status of 'knowledge'?

There are two reasons why this question will help us: first, Reid held that our ability to *know* depends, naturally enough, on the kind of cognitive abilities we happen to have. If we are working with a theory of perception, for instance, which *entails* that we cannot perceive an external material world, then scepticism is inevitable. Our first reaction might be: 'so much the worse for that theory of perception'. This was indeed Reid's initial response. But Reid understood that he also needed to develop an alternative account of our operations of mind, an account which was both in accord with the best science of his day, and which did *not* entail scepticism. Now to evaluate Reid's venture *we* need to know what sort of conditions Reid thought would need to be satisfied if such an account were not to entail scepticism; and for this, we need to make explicit Reid's theory of knowledge.

Second, setting out Reid's theory of knowledge in a manner with which contemporary epistemologists are familiar (that is, as a biconditional: S knows that p if and only if . . .) fits in nicely with Reid's own perspective on the limitations of his epistemology. Reid was

¹ "as Mr Humes sceptical System is all built upon a wrong & mistaken Account of the intellectual Powers of Man, so it can onely be refuted by giving a true Account of them." MS 7/V/4, 4.

committed to the view that we live in the kind of world in which the conditions for knowledge are, for the most part, satisfied; and, moreover, he thought that this was the most rational worldview or metaphysic on the market. But Reid also recognized that he could easily be mistaken in this—for his conditions for knowledge are, for the most part, inaccessible to human cognition and so cannot themselves be known. But even if we cannot know whether the conditions for knowledge are ever satisfied, they are nevertheless worth spelling out. For we would then at least know what kind of worldview or metaphysic we need to believe in, if we are to retain a *rational* commitment to the commonsense view that we do in fact know most of what we think we do. It would seem, then, that the conditional feature of contemporary theories of knowledge is also a philosophically appropriate means of conveying Reid's epistemology.

The aim of this paper, then, is to reconstruct Thomas Reid's theory of knowledge, drawing on an examination of his extant manuscripts and publications.² By way of an initial presentation, and using Reid's own terminology, I shall argue for the following analysis: a belief, Reid held, will count as knowledge if and only if (i) it is grounded upon good evidence, (ii) we believe it without doubting, (iii) we have a sound understanding, (iv) we have a clear comprehension or distinct conception of the object of our belief, and (v) we have formed our belief without prejudice. I will examine only the first three conditions in this paper.

1 EVIDENCE

If we reflect on our ordinary use of the term 'evidence', Reid suggests, we will find that we generally take it to refer to "whatever is a ground of belief."³ Now a 'ground' of something, taken in an architectural sense, can refer to the structural support or foundation of a building (and so, may be evaluated as 'strong or weak'); but it may also refer to a bare necessity of physics (without a ground, no structure is possible). Likewise, Reid thinks, we tend to think of evidence as that which provides structural support for our beliefs (making them rational or irrational), but also as a bare psychological necessity (without evidence, we would be incapable of even forming a belief).⁴

² Given the enormity of textual material involved in this project, I have tried to assist the reader by providing, in footnotes, the key portions of text that I take to support my exposition, rather than supplying references only. Quotations presented in the main body of the paper are, for the most part, limited to passages that require a close analysis or explanation. Manuscripts are identified by the MS catalogue number (e.g. 4/1/27) followed by the page or folio number (e.g. 4/1/27, 2r). The prefix '2131' for the MSS from the Birkwood Collection is not recorded.

³ "We give the name of evidence to whatever is a ground of belief." *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (Edinburgh, Printed For J. Bell, Parliament Square, and G. G. J. & J. Robinson, London, 1785): p. 271 (Hereafter all references to the *Intellectual Powers* are abbreviated by 'IP'); "Evidence is the ground of judgment" IP, p. 502.

⁴ Cf. "Is a ground anything that gives rise to a belief; or must it give the belief some support, render it justified or rational in

This account raises several questions: *that I am writing these words right now* is something that I feel impelled to believe.⁵ But suppose I believe this only because an evil scientist has threatened to torture me if I don't? Can I then say that 'evidence' is the ground of my belief? Surely the ground is, in this case, entirely prudential, and has nothing to do with my 'having evidence'.

There are two replies that Reid would give here: first, whatever non-epistemic *ends* we might achieve by believing something (e.g. prudence or convenience), the function of believing is such that we cannot believe some proposition without believing that it is *true*: the evil scientist would hardly be convinced if I told him 'I am not writing these words', but nevertheless *believed* I was.⁶

Second, Reid's view is not that beliefs arise only upon our *having* good evidence, but that beliefs arise when it *seems to us* that we have good evidence. And, of course, we do not always get it right. If our cognitive faculties are dysfunctional, or if we are not properly attentive to the object of our belief, then, as a consequence, we might fail to see that we have good evidence for a belief, or that what we take to be good evidence is nothing of the sort.⁷ Believing, then, even for prudential reasons is not possible without at least its seeming to us that we have evidence.

One final question: Suppose I try to meet the evil scientist's demand by simply refusing to believe that I am writing these words, in spite of its seeming to me that I have good evidence to the contrary. Can I not resist the impulsion created by evidence? Evidence may be necessary for belief, but is it sufficient? Reid's answer to this would be to ask you to reflect on your own experience: If you think you are now reading these words, and you have no evidence to the contrary, this means that it seems to you that you have evidence for the fact that you are now reading these words. So, the question is: as you read these words, *can* you resist the impulse to believe that you are now reading these words?

There are, of course, refinements needed here, but it is hard to avoid Reid's conclusion is that, so far as we can tell, belief is involuntary: upon its seeming to us that there is evidence

some degree? I think the answer must be: both." William Alston, "Reid on Perception and Conception", in M. Dalgarno and E. Matthews, eds. *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid* (Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, PSS 42, 1989): p. 41

⁵ Evidence, Reid states, "is more easily felt than described. Those who never reflected upon its nature, feel its influence in governing their belief" IP, p. 271; "it operates upon our belief whether we reflect upon its nature or not." MS 8/II/16, 3

⁶ Whatever nonepistemic ends a person might achieve by believing that *p* (e.g. prudence or convenience), the function of believing, for Reid, is such that, if a person believes at all, she must believe that *p* is true: "to believe a proposition means the same thing as to judge it to be true." IP, p. 513. Cf. "One has evidence that one's belief that *P* is *really true* when one has evidence that *P*". William Lycan, *Judgment and Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988): p. 137.

⁷ It is not in our power to judge as we will. The judgment is carried along necessarily by the evidence, *real or seeming*, which appears to us at the time". IP, p. 555. (My italics.)

for some proposition, then it is not within our power to refrain from believing that proposition.⁸

In view of these considerations, we may present Reid's position on the relation between evidence and belief as follows:

A₁ *S* believes that *p* at *t* if and only if it seems to *S* that there is evidence for the truth of *p* at *t*.

2. DEGREES OF BELIEF

One important feature missing from this analysis is this: Our beliefs are not all held with the same degree of strength or firmness. You are undoubtedly more certain that you are now reading these words than you are that you will finish reading this paper, even if you believe that you will. Does this mean that the evidence we think we have for some beliefs is so strong as to make them irresistible, whereas the evidence we think we have for other beliefs is so slim that we can easily renounce them whenever we like? If so, then evidence is not, as Reid seems to think, sufficient for belief.

Reid's reply here is, again, to ask us to reflect on our own experience: for example, attend, if you will, to the propositions *God exists* and *God does not exist*. Suppose it seems to you that you have no evidence for either proposition, or that, so far as you can tell, the evidence you have for one is no greater than the evidence for the other. In such a scenario, would it be within your power to make a judgement either way? Would you not find that, whether you liked it or not, your judgment would remain in "perfect suspense" (as Reid would say)? On the other hand, suppose it seems to you that one proposition has the slightest degree of evidence in its favour. Do you think you could resist forming a belief that it is true—taking it into account that, in view of the evidence, you would hold this belief with only the slightest degree of strength?⁹ If, as seems plausible, you could not help but form such a belief, then it follows that the extent to which beliefs are resistible is not proportionate to the weakness of evidence: as soon as it seems to us that there is more evidence for the truth of some proposition than its falsehood—no matter how slight that evidence is—then it is not within our power to refrain from believing that proposition.¹⁰ We may thus modify A₁ in the following way:

⁸ It is "not in a man's power to believe any thing longer than he thinks he has evidence", IP, p. 271; "when we see evidence, it is impossible not to judge", IP, p. 502; "Judgments be not immediately in our Power" MS 6/III/6, 1; "A parent or a master might command them to believe; but in vain; for belief is not in our power" *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh, Printed For J. Bell, Parliament Square, and G. G. J. & J. Robinson, London, 1788): p. 115. (Hereafter all references to the *Active Powers* are abbreviated by 'AP')

⁹ IP, p. 691.

¹⁰ Reid states that evidence is "fitted by Nature to produce belief in the human mind", either "in the highest degree, which we call certainty", or "in various degrees according to circumstances". IP, p. 272; "Every degree of evidence perceived by the mind, produces a proportioned degree of assent or belief." IP, p. 691.

- A₂ *S* forms or sustains a certain degree of belief that *p* at *t* if and only if (i) it seems to *S* that there is a certain degree of evidence for the truth of *p* at *t* and (ii) this degree of evidence is proportionate to her degree of belief that *p* at *t*.

3. EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION

We have looked at the way in which evidence provides us with an involuntary psychological impulse to believe. But we have yet to examine the sense in which Reid takes evidence to provide structural or epistemic support. First, Reid, as we have seen, allows that not all beliefs are grounded upon good evidence. But what is it that distinguishes good evidence from mere seeming evidence? “Good evidence” in Reid’s language, is that which produces beliefs which are “just and true”.¹¹ Good evidence functions as “the voucher for all truth”;¹² it is that which “ought to govern our belief as reasonable creatures”.¹³ Again, Reid tells us that “It is every mans concern & every mans wish to believe onely what he has just ground to believe & not to believe, where he has no just ground for belief.” (MS, 8/II/16); And finally, “To believe without evidence is a weakness which every man is concerned to avoid, and which every man wishes to avoid.” (IP, p. 271.)

We can perhaps sum up these phrases in the following way: on Reid’s account, a belief that is grounded upon good evidence obtains a positive evaluation from an epistemic point of view: for such a belief has fulfilled the epistemic aim of believing something if and only if there is good evidence for its truth.¹⁴ To use a more concise terminology, Reid holds that:

- A₃ *S*’s belief that *p* is epistemically justified only if it is grounded upon good evidence.¹⁵

Reid, it must be said, uses the term “justify” to refer to the epistemic status obtained by virtue of something we *do*, such as *producing an argument* to support a belief. For example:

¹¹ IP, p. 517.

¹² IP, p. 593.

¹³ IP, p. 273.

¹⁴ “It is every mans concern & every mans wish to believe onely what he has just ground to believe & not to believe, where he has no just ground for belief.” MS, 8/II/16; “To believe without evidence is a weakness which every man is concerned to avoid, and which every man wishes to avoid.” IP, p. 271.

¹⁵ Cf. William P. Alston, “Concepts of Epistemic Justification”, in *Epistemic Justification* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989): p. 83.

“When I believe the truth of a mathematical Axiom, or of a proposition that necessarily follows from it; I see that the thing cannot possibly be otherwise. There is nothing I can desiderate to *justify this belief*. I see that the thing is so and why it is so.”¹⁶

The term as I use it in the following exposition, however, will refer only to the *state* or *condition* of being epistemically justified. Hence, it may be applied to *any* belief that is grounded upon good evidence, whether this be the evidence of reasoning or that of self-evidence (as in the quotation above).¹⁷

4. DEGREES OF JUSTIFICATION

As we have seen, Reid holds that, as with degrees of belief, there are also degrees of evidence; and these may be distinguished into two basic kinds, probable and demonstrative. We have also seen that evidence is that which renders our beliefs justified; and so, it seems natural to say that degrees of evidence confer degrees of justification. ‘Demonstrative evidence’, then, affords the highest degree of justification, a degree which Reid calls “absolute certainty”. This kind of justification, Reid held, can be ascribed only to our beliefs in necessary truths. Any belief in a contingent truth must therefore be based upon probable evidence. However, probable evidence may still afford a very high degree of justification. Indeed, what is interesting is Reid’s suggestion that the highest degree of probable evidence can produce a degree of justification that is equal to that afforded by demonstration.

“That there is such a city as Rome, I am as certain as of any proposition in EUCLID; but the evidence is not demonstrative, but of that kind which Philosophers call probable.”¹⁸

Now, as we have seen, Reid says that only demonstrative evidence can give us ‘absolute certainty’, so there must be something wrong here. My suggestion is that the term ‘absolute certainty’ refers not only to a degree, but to a certain kind of justification, namely, the kind that leaves no *logical* room for doubt because the proposition believed could not be false. Probable evidence of the highest degree, however, may give us a slightly different kind of justification, namely, the kind that leaves no *psychological* room for doubt, even though the

¹⁶ MS 8/II/10, 3 (My italics). cf. “Dr HARTLEY is brought at last to *justify* this deviation in theory, and to bring arguments in defence of a method diametrically opposite to it.” IP, p. 88; “The child, . . . acts agreeably to the constitution and intention of Nature, even when he does and believes what reason would not *justify*.” IP, p. 297; “Though this belief cannot be *justified* upon his system, it ought to be accounted for as a phenomenon of human nature.” IP, pp. 351-52; “This instinctive induction is not *justified* by the rules of logic” IP, p. 457; “Some objects strike us at once, and appear beautiful at first sight, without any reflection, without our being able to say why we call them beautiful, or being able to specify any perfection which *justifies our judgment*.” IP, p. 743. (My italics)

¹⁷ This distinction is made by Alston, for example, in his “Concepts of Epistemic Justification”, pp. 82-83.

¹⁸ IP, p. 691.

proposition believed could be false. Let us say that this kind of justification is ‘fallibilist certainty’.¹⁹ Then we can say that absolute and fallibilist certainty refer to the same degree of justification, and even accompany the same degree of belief: we find we cannot doubt that there is such a city as Rome any more than we can doubt a proposition of Euclid. The only difference is the reason why we cannot doubt: one is logical, the other merely psychological.

There is a good explanation for this equivalency between degrees of justification and degrees of belief. Reid holds that, for the most part, we measure a degree of evidence—that is, the degree of justification afforded by evidence—by means of the degree of belief it produces in us:

“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.”²⁰

More precisely, Reid holds that:

A₄ *S*’s belief that *p* has a higher degree of epistemic justification than her belief that *q* only if (i) both beliefs are grounded upon good evidence, and (ii) *S* believes that *p* with more firmness or strength than that with which she believes that *q*.²¹

If epistemic justification comes in degrees, it would make sense to ask whether there is some point at which a true belief might have a degree of justification sufficient to convert it to knowledge. Reid’s response here would be that the true belief must be held with “certainty”.

“In knowledge, we judge without doubting; in opinion, with some mixture of doubt.”²²

“there can be no knowledge without judgment, though there may be judgment without that certainty which we commonly call knowledge.”²³

¹⁹ It is crucial that my use of the term ‘certainty’ in this formulation as a degree of belief be distinguished from ‘certainty’ taken as a degree of justification, as, for instance, Chisholm appears to do in his definition of the same term: “When we say that he *feels* certain . . . we are saying something about the strength of his conviction or about the felt strength of his conviction. But when we say that something *is* certain for him . . . we may, but of course we need not, be saying something . . . about what he has a right to believe, or what it is reasonable for him to believe. Let us restrict the expression ‘is certain for him’ to this normative and objective sense.” Chisholm, *Person and Object*, p. 26.

²⁰ IP, p. 691; cf. “such is the constitution of the human mind, that evidence discerned by us, forces a corresponding degree of assent. And a man who perfectly understood a just syllogism, without believing that the conclusion follows from the premises, would be a greater monster than a man born without hands or feet.” IP, p. 593.

²¹ To be clear, this is not yet sufficient. Reid’s view, as I will show, is that *S* must also have a “sound understanding”, a distinct conception of *p* and *q*, and a non-prejudicial belief in *p* and *q*.

²² IP, p. 533

²³ IP, p. 504. cf. “judgment extends to every kind of evidence, probable or certain, and to every degree of assent or dissent. It extends to all knowledge as well as to all opinion; with this difference only, that in knowledge it is more firm and steady, like a house founded upon a rock. In opinion it stands upon a weaker foundation, and is more liable to be shaken and overturned.” IP, p. 534.

Reid is not suggesting that knowledge requires that kind of justification he calls ‘*absolute certainty*’. For Reid clearly holds that contingent truths may be known. Knowledge is not, therefore, to be decided by whether the certainty in question is absolute or fallibilist. Rather it is to be decided by whether our firmness of belief is such that we find ourselves with no room for doubt, whether the cause be logical or psychological. Reid’s first necessary condition for knowledge may thus be formulated in the following way:

- A₅ S’s belief that *p* has a degree of epistemic justification sufficient for knowledge only if (i) S’s belief is grounded upon good evidence, and (ii) *S* believes that *p* without doubt.

5. REID’S EXTERNALISM

I have been using the term ‘justification’ as a way of conveying Reid’s notion of epistemic appraisal. Unfortunately, this term carries its own conceptual baggage. In particular, it has been said to imply or suggest “epistemic deontologism”, that is, the view that there are epistemic duties, obligations, requirements, and so forth; and that this view, in turn, motivates internalism.²⁴ Hence, our use of this term must be carefully qualified.

First, we can define internalism and externalism, broadly, as follows. Let us say that a *justifying factor* is whatever brings it about that a belief is justified. *Internalism* is, then, the view that our belief is justified only if all of the justifying factors for that belief are (or could be) cognitively accessible to us; that is, we must be (or be capable of being) aware of them. *Externalism*, on the other hand, is the view that our belief is justified even if some or all of the justifying factors for that belief are not (or could not be) cognitively accessible to us; we need not be (or be capable of being) aware of them.²⁵

Our question, then, is whether Reid is an internalist or an externalist. Reid certainly makes claims that would make him an internalist. As we have seen, he states that we must be *aware* of the evidence for our beliefs, in the sense that it must seem to us to *be* evidence. Again, he suggests that we have some voluntary control, if only indirectly, over our beliefs. Take the following quote:

“In every case the assent ought to be proportioned to the evidence; for to believe firmly, what has but a small degree of probability, is a manifest abuse of our understanding.”²⁶

²⁴ Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, p. 11ff.

²⁵ Cf. Laurence Bonjour, “Externalism/Internalism”, in J. Dancy and E. Sosa: *A Companion to Epistemology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992): p. 132.

²⁶ IP, p. 48.

It is important to note that Reid is only saying here that our degree of belief ought to be proportioned to the degree of probability that evidence *actually* has. This does not imply that it is within our power to believe more firmly than is proportionate to that degree of probability which the evidence *seems* to us to have. Such a phenomenon would not be the result of an “abuse of our understanding”, but rather due to some cognitive malfunction:

“such is the constitution of the human mind, that evidence discerned by us, forces a corresponding degree of assent. And a man who perfectly understood a just syllogism, without believing that the conclusion follows from the premises, would be a greater monster than a man born without hands or feet.”²⁷

Hence, we have no obligation to proportion the strength of our belief to what *seems to us* to be a certain degree of evidence: this will happen whether we like it or not. However, it is possible, in Reid’s view, to exert our voluntary intellectual powers so as to bring it about that we fail to gain an accurate perception of the degree of probability that some evidence *actually* has. As a consequence, we may be mistaken in thinking that some evidence has a high degree of probability, and thus form a belief with a higher degree of strength than is warranted. But this does not imply that Reid is an internalist.

To explain this, we need to introduce Reid’s third condition for knowledge, namely, that we must have “a sound understanding.”²⁸ First, as we shall see, ‘having a sound understanding’ is an entirely *external* justifying factor. Whether or not we have a sound understanding is not something to which we can have cognitive access. Second, we could not ground our beliefs upon good evidence and yet fail to have a sound understanding: for, as we shall see, if our understanding is sound, then the faculties by which we form our belief will be functioning properly; and this, in part, involves something’s seeming to us to be good evidence only when it actually is. But then, since we cannot know whether our understanding is sound, it follows that we can ground our belief on good evidence without our ever being (or needing to be) aware of the fact. For these reasons, then, Reid cannot be read as an internalist.

We will not have space here to deal with the final two conditions: the forming of distinct conceptions and believing without prejudice. But it is worth mentioning that the same reasoning above applies, with this important addition. Reid states that it is within our power to “abuse our understanding”, that is, to render it ‘unsound’; and it is precisely the forming of distinct conceptions and believing without prejudice over which we have such power.²⁹ Part of

²⁷ IP, p. 593.

²⁸ IP, p. 691. These three conditions are repeated in the context of Reid’s discussion of what it is for a first principle to be ‘self-evident’: “Self-evident propositions are those which appear evident to every man of sound understanding who apprehends the meaning of them distinctly, and attends to them without prejudice.” IP, p. 161.

²⁹ Nicholas Wolterstorff presents a similar externalist interpretation of Reid’s epistemology in “Hume and Reid” *Monist* 70

the epistemologist's task, then, is to enable us to understand better this power that we have, and the processes by which we might better direct its exertions so as to ensure that we do form distinct conceptions and believe without prejudice. In other words, the degree to which our beliefs are justified is not dependent upon our awareness that we have formed a distinct conception or that we have believed without prejudice. However, it is dependent on whether we exert our voluntary intellectual operations in such a manner that we succeed or fail to form a distinct conception and believe without prejudice.

6. SOUND UNDERSTANDING

We come then to Reid's third necessary condition for knowledge, which is that we have a "sound understanding". In this section, I argue that this involves four conditions.³⁰

Reid argues that our intellectual powers were designed to achieve several purposes: the preservation and well-being of our species, the ability to form correct judgments regarding what is good upon the whole, or what is our duty, and so on.³¹ When we achieve these ends, it may therefore be said that our faculties are functioning properly: that is, they are functioning the way they were designed to function by the Author of our nature.

However, one can easily imagine a Humean world in which these ends are achieved with mostly false beliefs.³² Hence, the mere fact that our faculties are functioning properly is not sufficient. It must also be the case that our intellectual powers were designed for the purpose of producing *true* beliefs. In other words, by the condition of "sound understanding", Reid means, in part, that the powers by which the belief is produced must be functioning in such a way as to bring about at least one particular end for which they were designed, namely, the production of true beliefs:

(1988): pp. 398-417. However, given the prominent role that Reid gives to the voluntary intellectual powers in satisfying the conditions for epistemic justification, along with Reid's lengthy consideration of 'prejudices to avoid' (IP, Essay VI, Ch.8), I must disagree with Wolterstorff's view that "Reid offers no rules for the direction of the mind, lays down no intellectual obligations - other than the bland injunction to avoid drawing conclusions hastily", p. 410.

³⁰ My exposition in this section, it must be said, is quite similar to the basic outline of Alvin Plantinga's recent (Reidian) account of epistemic warrant in *Warrant and Proper Function*. However, I have endeavoured to ensure that these conditions are stated in a manner that is faithful to Reid, for instance, by presenting no more philosophical detail than is textually warranted.

³¹ AP, pp. 82-86.

³² E.g. where "the whole universe about me, bodies and spirits, sun, moon, stars, and earth, friends and relations, all things without exception, which I imagined to have a permanent existence, whether I thought of them or not, vanish at once" Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, in *The Works of Thomas Reid*, . . . ed. W. Hamilton, 6th ed. (Edinburgh, Maclachlan and Stewart, 1863, reprint Thoemmes press, 1994): p. 96a (Hereafter all references to the *Inquiry* are abbreviated by 'HM'); cf. Plantinga's "Is Naturalism Irrational?" in *Warrant and Proper Function*, Chapter 12.

“OUR intellectual powers are wisely fitted by the Author of our nature for the discovery of truth, as far as suits our present state. Error is not their natural issue, any more than disease is of the natural structure of the body.”³³

“We must judge of the Intention of our faculties from their sound and natural State . . . our Senses are given us by nature not to deceive but to give us true information of things within their Reach”³⁴

The phrases “as far as suits our present state” and “things within their Reach” give us the second condition. As we saw earlier, Reid argues that our faculties were designed to operate in quite specific environments. Thus, even if our faculties are functioning as they were designed to function, there may be occasions when there is a mismatch between the environment and the faculties, such that the beliefs therein produced are mostly false. Now Reid argues that, as it happens, our faculties *are* presently in that environment for which they were designed; and that any errors produced by a properly functioning power of the mind, such as perception, may be explained by reference to the fallacious application of certain voluntary powers of the mind.³⁵ There is, however, one feature that may be described as ‘environmental’, of which Reid admits the possibility of a mismatch. Reid allows that the mind may continue to function following the death of the body:

“Tho Death puts an End to the power of the Mind over that System of Matter we call the Body & it can no more produce either Vital or Voluntary Motions in it or have Sensations by Impressions made upon it it no wise follows that the other Powers of the Mind should thereby cease”³⁶

In the present *earthly* cognitive environment, however, the intellectual powers depend upon certain internal and external physical organs: the internal organs being “nerves and the brain”, and the external being various body parts, such as the eye. Thus, while there may be no dysfunction in some intellectual power, a disorder in the physical organ to which it is regularly conjoined, will tend to produce false beliefs:³⁷

³³ IP, p. 652; cf. “The understanding, in its natural and best state, pays its homage to truth only.” IP, p. 652; “the senses . . . are formed by the wise and beneficent Author of Nature, to give us true information of things necessary to our preservation and happiness.” IP, p. 288.

³⁴ MS 8/II/22, 2-3

³⁵ See IP, Chap 22, “*Of the Fallacy of the Senses*”.

³⁶ MS 4/II/4, 1. “We grant that the Soul is presently so connected with the body as to be greatly affected by the good or bad state of it. But it follows not from this that it may not continue to exist when that connexion is totally broke. We may with better reason conclude on the contrary, that as the operations of the Mind are limited and confined by its connexion with the body, those operations will be more free & unconfined when that connexion is dissolved.” MS 4/II/19, 2.

³⁷ Ben-Zeev argues to the effect that any direct realist account of perception, such as Reid’s, requires, for the epistemic justification of perceptual beliefs, the satisfaction of the first two externalist conditions we have mentioned above: “it would make no (religious, evolutionary, pragmatic, *etc.*) sense to assume that the perceptual system is false when it is properly functioning”. A. Ben-Zeev, “Reid’s direct approach to perception”, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 17 (1986): p. 110.

“our Senses ought not to be accounted fallacious because we are sometimes deceived by them when the Organs are disordered and in some unnatural State. We must judge of the Intention of our faculties from their sound and natural State and not from any disorder of them which is accidental. And thus we actually Judge in other cases. Thus every man judges that a Mans feet & legs are fitted by nature for his walking upon them; Nor is it any Objection to this that some Men are lame & unable to walk upon their legs. In like Manner our Senses are given us by nature not to deceive but to give us true information of things within their Reach, and it is no objection to this that when there is any disorder that is accidental & preternatural in our organs of perception we may from that cause be led to judge wrong.”³⁸

The third condition arises due to the following problem: even if the preceding two conditions were satisfied, it may yet be that our beliefs turn out to be mostly false. For the design itself, and the actions of the designer in bringing about the relevant effects, may be defective: in short, the Author of our nature may, in this respect, be unreliable. Hence, the following condition is required: if the faculty (or set of faculties) that produces a belief is designed to produce true beliefs, and is functioning properly in an appropriate cognitive environment, then it must be more probable than not that the belief in question is true.³⁹

The crucial question, of course, is whether this condition is satisfied for (most of) our beliefs. Reid’s response here demonstrates his view that epistemology intersects crucially with metaphysics: that is, Reid argues that there are no beliefs within a theistic metaphysic that would entail or render it more probable than not that beliefs produced by a sound understanding are (mostly) false.

“we have no reason to think that God has given fallacious powers to any of his creatures: This would be to think dishonourably of our Maker, and would lay a foundation for universal scepticism”.⁴⁰

³⁸ MS 8/II/22, 2-3; cf. “The imagination, the memory, the judging and reasoning powers, are all liable to be hurt, or even destroyed, by disorders of the body, as well as our powers of perception; but we do not on this account call them fallacious.” IP, p. 291; We must acknowledge it to be the lot of human nature, that all the human faculties are liable, by accidental causes, to be hurt and unfitted for their natural functions, either wholly or in part: But as this imperfection is common to them all, it gives no just ground for accounting any of them fallacious.” IP, p. 301.

³⁹ Cf. Plantinga’s formulation of this condition: “the design governing the production of the belief in question [must] be a good one; still more exactly . . . the module of the design plan governing its production must be such that it is objectively highly probable that a belief produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly according to that module (in a congenial environment) will be true or verisimilitudinous.” *Warrant and Proper Function*, p. 17.

⁴⁰ IP, p. 291. cf. “it seems to be a very 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.” IP, p. 290; “if we should take for granted all that [philosophers] have said on this subject, the natural conclusion from it might seem to be, that the senses are given to us by some malignant Dæmon on purpose to delude us, rather than that they are formed by the wise and beneficent Author of Nature, to give us true information of things necessary to our preservation and happiness.” IP, p. 288.

This response should not be taken to mean that theism plays a Cartesian role in Reid's epistemology.⁴¹ For this, Reid argues, would be tantamount to epistemic circularity,⁴² that is, where one may commit epistemic circularity in one of two ways: first, in attempting to show that *one* faculty is reliable, it is assumed in the process, that that faculty is reliable; or second, in attempting to show that *every* faculty is reliable, it is assumed that *at least one* faculty is reliable. Reid does not therefore pretend to show that our faculties are reliable by inference from the existence of a benevolent Creator; for this would assume that at least one faculty is reliable: whether the faculty of reasoning, or, as Reid holds, some faculty that gives rise to a self-evident belief.⁴³

This problem will be true for *any* view of our epistemic position. For example, we might decide that, in view of our inability to provide any good reason for trusting our faculties, scepticism is the only rational option. But we cannot arrive at this position without exerting at least one of our faculties. Again, we might take an agnostic view, withholding any belief until such time as there is sufficient evidence to justify a belief in the reliability of our faculties. However, as Reid states, such agnosticism would, of necessity, be a permanent predicament. For how could we ever be persuaded out of our agnosticism, when it entails that we refuse to believe that our faculties are reliable until we exert our faculty of reasoning so as to conclude that they are reliable?

“If a Sceptic should build his scepticism upon this foundation, that all our reasoning and judging powers are fallacious in their nature, or should resolve at least to with-hold assent until it be proved that they are not; it would be impossible by argument to beat him out of this strong hold, and he must even be left to enjoy his scepticism.”⁴⁴

Finally, except in cases of ‘metaphysical lunacy’ and cognitive dysfunction, it is not within our power to refrain from believing that the deliverances of our faculties are, for the most part, reliable. Indeed, we give expression to this belief whenever we act:⁴⁵

⁴¹ As Daniels seems to think: “Reid’s only defense against the sceptical outcome of his own nativism - namely, that our constitutions might lead us to systematically false beliefs - is his belief that God would not deceive us (p. 117) . . . Reid justifies natively given ‘common sense’ beliefs through a dogmatic appeal to God as a nondeceiver” (pp. 119-20) Norman Daniels, *Thomas Reid’s Inquiry* (New York, N.Y.: B. Franklin, 1974).

⁴² This term derives from William P. Alston, “Epistemic Circularity”, in *Epistemic Justification* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989): Essay 12. See also, Alston, “Thomas Reid on Epistemic Principles”, pp. 444-45.

⁴³ “every argument offered to prove the truth and fidelity of our faculties, takes for granted the thing in question, and is therefore that kind of sophism which Logicians call *petitio principii*.” IP, p. 710; “Every kind of reasoning for the veracity of our faculties, amounts to no more than taking their own testimony for their veracity; and this we must do implicitly, until God give us new faculties to sit in judgment upon the old.” IP, p. 593. This last phrase is puzzling, given that any *new* faculties would fall under the same problem.

⁴⁴ IP, p. 592.

⁴⁵ “The Sceptic may perhaps persuade himself in general, that he has no ground to believe his senses or his memory: But, in

“Although some writers on this subject have disputed the authority of the senses, of memory, and of every human faculty; yet we find, that such persons, in the conduct of life, in pursuing their ends, or in avoiding dangers, pay the same regard to the authority of their senses, and other faculties, as the rest of mankind. By this they give us just ground to doubt of their candour in their professions of scepticism.”⁴⁶

Reid’s position, then, is this: all of us cannot help but place some degree of trust in the reliability of our cognitive faculties:

“The judgments grounded upon the evidence of sense, of memory, and of consciousness, put all men upon a level. The Philosopher, with regard to these, has no prerogative above the illiterate, or even above the savage. Their reliance upon the testimony of these faculties is as firm and as well grounded as his.”⁴⁷

Given this state of affairs, the primary task for epistemologists is to propose a metaphysic that is superior to any other by virtue of its capacity to preserve better the *rationality* of the trust we cannot help but place in our faculties. Reid’s contribution, in this respect, is to argue that, within the context of a theistic metaphysic, there is no good reason to believe that scepticism is a live possibility. For a theistic metaphysic consists of a set of beliefs, no member of which either affirms or leads to the denial of the reliability of our faculties, a feature that could not be claimed of a system such as that advanced by David Hume.⁴⁸ In short, Reid’s view is that, within a theistic universe, it is more probable than not that a person with a ‘sound understanding’ *will* form (mostly) true beliefs.

Reid’s requirement that the agent have a “sound understanding” may therefore be analysed as follows:

- A₆ *S*’s belief that *p* has a degree of epistemic justification sufficient for knowledge at *t* only if (a) the faculty (or set of faculties) by which *S*’s belief was produced is designed to produce true beliefs; (b) it is functioning properly at *t*, (c) in an environment for which it was designed to function at *t*, and (d) if the conditions in (a)-(c) were satisfied, then it would be more probable than not that *p* is true.

particular cases that are interesting, his disbelief vanishes, and he finds himself under a necessity of believing both.” IP, p. 505.

⁴⁶ IP, p. 45.

⁴⁷ IP, pp. 504-5.

⁴⁸ Cf. “there are no propositions [the theist] already accepts just by way of being a theist, which together with forms of reasoning . . . lead to the rejection of the belief that our cognitive faculties have the apprehension of truth as their purpose and for the most part fulfil that purpose.” Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper function*, p. 237.